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Evangelical theological perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism

De Chirico, Leonardo

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KING'S COLLEGE LONDON

**EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL
PERSPECTIVES
ON POST-VATICAN II
ROMAN CATHOLICISM**

Leonardo De Chirico

Submitted at King's College London for the Degree of
the Doctor of Philosophy

September 2002



ABSTRACT

The Second Vatican Council and subsequent ecumenical developments within the Church of Rome have forced Evangelical theology to rethink its own perception and analysis of Roman Catholicism. Against this background, many Evangelical theologians of varying tendencies and with different degrees of depth and insight have attempted to grapple with the new Roman Catholic outlook and the ecumenical challenges it brings. After describing the theological contours of Evangelicalism, the present thesis critically surveys the works on Roman Catholicism by Gerrit Berkouwer, Cornelius Van Til, David Wells, Donald Bloesch, Herbert Carson, and John Stott.

Two other chapters present and assess the outcome of two on-going dialogues. The first has seen the involvement of the World Evangelical Fellowship and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity whereas the second, i.e. the *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* process, is more closely related to the North-American situation and has a more informal profile.

It will be argued that the Evangelical appraisal of Roman Catholicism has in general suffered from a lack of systemic awareness in dealing with it. The prevailing approach has been marked by an interpretative atomism instead of the pursuit of a hermeneutics of Roman Catholicism capable of accounting for it as a theological system. The last two chapters propose the formulation of an Evangelical systemic analysis in two ways. First, by supporting the feasibility of the category of system as applied to Roman Catholicism, thus developing the basic theological hermeneutics proposed by Abraham Kuyper. Second, by indicating in the Roman Catholic articulations of the relationship between nature and grace and in the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Roman Church the two main theological *foci* of the system. The critical works on Roman Catholicism by the Evangelical theologians and the conclusions of the dialogues examined in the course of the research are critically evaluated according to the systemic approach outlined.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals
CA	C. VAN TIL, <i>Christian Apologetics</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1976)
CB	C. VAN TIL, <i>Christianity and Barthianism</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1962)
CC	C. VAN TIL, <i>The Case for Calvinism</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1964)
CCC	<i>Catechism of the Catholic Church</i> (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1994)
CP	D. BLOESCH, <i>The Crisis of Piety</i> (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1968)
CTC	J. STOTT, <i>Christ the Controversialist. The Basics of Belief</i> (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1970)
CTK	C. VAN TIL, <i>A Christian Theory of Knowledge</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1969)
CWR	G. BERKOUWER, <i>The Conflict with Rome</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1958)
DF	C. VAN TIL, <i>The Defense of the Faith</i> (Philadelphia, PA: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1955)
DS	DENZINGER-SCHÖNMETZER, <i>Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum</i> – editio XXXVI emendata (Freiburg i.B.: Herder 1976)
DT	H. CARSON, <i>Dawn or Twilight? A Study of Contemporary Roman Catholicism</i> (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1976)
DV	<i>Dei Verbum</i> (1965) in W. ABBOTT (ed.), <i>The Documents of Vatican II</i> (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman 1966) 111-128
EET	D. BLOESCH, <i>Essentials of Evangelical Theology</i> , 2 vols. (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publ. 1978-1979)
ECT	“Evangelical and Catholics Together” in C. COLSON AND R. NEUHAUS (eds.) <i>Evangelical and Catholics Together. Toward a Common Mission</i> (Dallas, TX: Word publ. 1995) xv-xxxiii
ER	D. BLOESCH, <i>The Evangelical Renaissance</i> (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1973)
ERT	<i>Evangelical Review of Theology</i>

ERCDOM	<i>Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission</i> in J. STOTT and B. MEEKING Basil (eds.), <i>The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984</i> (Grand Rapids, MI-Exeter: Eerdmans-Paternoster 1986)
FEC	D. BLOESCH, <i>The Future of Evangelical Christianity: A Call to Unity Amid Diversity</i> (New York, NY: Doubleday & Co. 1983)
FV	H. CARSON, <i>The Faith of the Vatican. A Fresh Look at Roman Catholicism</i> (Darlington: Evangelical Press 1996)
GJC	"The Gospel of Jesus Christ. An Evangelical Celebration", <i>Christianity Today</i> (Jun 14, 1999) 51-56
GOS	"The Gift of Salvation", <i>Christianity Today</i> (Dec 8, 1997) 34
GS	<i>Gaudium et Spes</i> (1963) in W. ABBOTT (ed.), <i>The Documents of Vatican II</i> (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman 1966) 199-331
IFED	Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione
LG	<i>Lumen Gentium</i> (1964) in W. ABBOTT (ed.), <i>The Documents of Vatican II</i> (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman 1966) 14-96
NM	C. VAN TIL, <i>The New Modernism. An Appraisal of the Theology of Barth and Brunner</i> (London: Clarke & Co. 1946)
PCPCU	Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity
PTGT	D. WELLS, <i>The Prophetic Theology of George Tyrrell</i> (Chico, CA: Scholars Press 1981)
RCT	H. CARSON, <i>Roman Catholicism Today</i> (London: Inter-Varsity Fellowship 1964)
RDRCT	G. BERKOUWER, <i>Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought</i> (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans 1958)
RPMT	C. VAN TIL, <i>The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought</i> (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publ. Co. 1971)
RR	D. WELLS, <i>Revolution in Rome</i> (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press 1972)
SC	<i>Sacrosanctum Concilium</i> (1963) in W. ABBOTT (ed.), <i>The Documents of Vatican II</i> (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman 1966) 137-178
SP	D. BLOESCH, <i>The Struggle of Prayer</i> (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row Publ. 1980)

SS	D. WELLS, <i>The Search for Salvation</i> (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press 1978)
SVCNC	G. BERKOUWER, <i>The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism</i> (Grand Rapids ^{MI} : Eerdmans 1965)
UR	<i>Unitatis Redintegratio</i> (1964) in W. ABBOTT (ed.), <i>The Documents of Vatican II</i> (London-Dublin: Geoffrey Chapman 1966) 341-366
WCC	World Council of Churches
WEA	World Evangelical Alliance
WEF	World Evangelical Fellowship

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like any other work, the completion of the present thesis has greatly benefited from the help, advice and support of many people whose names will not be directly associated with the thesis itself but, nonetheless, have played an important part in shaping it.

As a young promising student, I was encouraged to pursue further studies by my dear parents Vitantonio and Maddalena to whom I owe an immense debt of gratitude. Their trust and support have been constant over the years and have given me part of the necessary confidence to begin doing research. This work is a tangible result of their encouragement.

Dr Brian Horne of King's College, London, has been a stimulating and careful supervisor to work with. Our numerous conversations, his searching questions and wise counsels have taught me a lot in terms of methodological rigour and theological breadth. I wish to express to him my personal, sincere appreciation for his gentle, yet firm supervision.

Dr Pietro Bolognesi of Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione (Padova, Italy) has closely followed the development of this project from beginning to end with his characteristically penetrating comments. Working alongside him at IFED since 1997 has proved to be a thoroughly enriching experience in an ideal context for theological research. I wish many other theological students could have a mentor like him.

Dr Daniel Walker of Reggio Emilia (Italy) has been of considerable assistance in turning my attempts at written English into something more readable. I cannot thank him enough for the many hours spent together reading, amending, and rephrasing the text: not exactly a thrilling experience! Any linguistic oddities which remain in the text are totally my own responsibility.

Last but not least, my wife Valeria has inevitably been closely involved in this research project from the very start and her loving influence has been vitally important in giving me the strength to go on. More than anyone else, she knows what this work has meant – for both of us: commitment, study, joy, and sheer hard work. It is only right to mention our son Filippo in this context, especially when one considers that he was born in the same month of the same year in which I started the

project (September 1996). He has grown up alongside this thesis but he is definitely of much greater value.

From the very beginning, I have sought to consider academic research as any other aspect of life, that is a joyful and committed response to the bountiful grace of the Triune God. May the God whom I desire to know, love, and serve be glorified through this work.

INTRODUCTION

Catholics and Evangelicals. Do they share a common future? This is the title of a recent volume surveying the present-day amicable and brotherly dialogue between some Evangelicals and some Catholics, especially in the North American context.¹ It is difficult to say whether Roman Catholics and Evangelicals will indeed share a common future. Too many basic factors in the dialogue are still uncertain for such a prospect to be considered feasible or even foreseeable. The fact that the editors of the book use a question mark in the title indicates that even the supporters of this trend are not entirely sure how the relationship between representatives of the two traditions will develop. In spite of the uncertainty about what is going to happen next, many would still uphold the conviction that something new has been happening since the days of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). Some believe that the centuries-long conflict between Evangelicals and Catholics is at last coming to its final stage and giving way to an age of substantial rapprochement, at least on an informal level even if it does not involve ecclesiastical endorsement. Others are more than ever persuaded that there are still good theological reasons for continuing ecclesiastical separation and for avoiding any form of ecumenical cooperation. Paraphrasing the title of another recent volume which expresses a widespread concern among Evangelicals, many are still persuaded that the *Reformation's conflict with Rome must continue*,² in spite of all attempts at dialogue between the parties and the changes which have taken place since Vatican II within both Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism. Those who take this view believe that Evangelicals need to go back to the same polemical stance which is associated with the Reformation without taking into consideration the inner dynamics which Roman Catholicism has been experiencing since the XVI century. Between the prospect of a common future, on

¹ Cf. Rausch (2000). The book presents a kind of *status quaestionis* of the North American dialogue; unfortunately, it does not properly take into account the theological critique that has been formulated in Evangelical circles. This is a missed opportunity. While it is understandable that the Evangelical supporters of the dialogue wish to move ahead without being held back by adverse criticism, it would have been better to deal with it in a constructive way in order to sharpen the theological discernment of those involved in the dialogue.

² Reymond (2001). This hard-line position is essentially argued for on the basis of one central issue which, according to Reymond, is the doctrine of justification by faith. The last chapter is emphatically entitled "The Conflict Must Continue for the True Gospel's Sake!".

the one hand, and the call for the continuation of the conflict, on the other, there are all kinds of intermediate positions which complicate the overall picture. A realistic assessment of the situation is summarised by Bray when he argues that “the future of Evangelical-Catholic dialogue is at best uncertain”.³

The present-day situation is one which calls for theological discernment as far as the ecumenical significance of the present state of Roman Catholic-Evangelical relations. In the midst of such a composite scenario, fraught with historical, psychological, theological and ecclesiastical overtones, it is necessary to pursue a theological analysis centred on what is really at stake in an Evangelical appraisal of Roman Catholicism. The aim of such an endeavour is to provide both a critical review of what Evangelical theology has elaborated in terms of its extremely varied and, at times, contrasting approach to Roman Catholicism and to suggest a constructive way of coming to terms with Roman Catholicism as a multidimensional yet unitary system. Closely related to this hermeneutical premise, an Evangelical theological perspective needs to single out the nature-grace relationship and the Christologically-based self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church as the determining factors which shape the theological profile of the system. There is no point in addressing Roman Catholicism at random, with a theological naivety which is not capable of perceiving and assessing Roman Catholicism itself in a systemic way. Over the last forty years, Evangelical theology has been engaged in three main tasks which are still relevant and open-ended. First, the Evangelical theological appraisal of Roman Catholicism has been challenged by post-Vatican II developments in Roman Catholicism which have added further complexity to an already complex situation. Vatican II has brought *aggiornamento* to the Roman Catholic Church. The word does not denote reformation in the Evangelical sense but neither is it a merely political and linguistic device aimed at concealing an unchanging reality. It is instead the Roman Catholic way of responding to the need for some kind of renewal without altering the fundamental structure inherited from the past and its non-negotiable thrust. Second, Evangelical theology has had unprecedented opportunities to initiate and participate in theological discussions with Roman Catholics which have considerably increased the scope of Evangelical interaction with non-Evangelical circles. Third, Evangelical theology has been stimulated to reflect afresh on what is really at stake theologically in confronting

³ Bray (2000) 137.

Roman Catholicism given the apparent contrast between old interpretative stereotypes and the inner development and manifold reality of Roman Catholicism itself. In this respect, Roman Catholicism represents an interesting case-study in evaluating Evangelical theology's attempts to engage in theological hermeneutics and ecumenical exchanges.

0.1 A Changing Appraisal of Roman Catholicism

After attempting to identify the elastic contours of Evangelical theology in its contemporary outlook, the present research deals with a number of Evangelical theologians who have interacted with Roman Catholicism in general and with Roman Catholic theology in particular over the last forty years. Their different analyses represent some important case-studies which help to ascertain the degree of hermeneutical awareness and theological depth of their approaches to Roman Catholicism.

The first of the theologians who is assessed is Gerrit Berkouwer (1903-1996). According to Berkouwer, the Council might be thought of as representing the cautious acceptance by the official Church, in spite of tensions and conflicts, of the agenda proposed by the *nouvelle théologie* which had been opposed by the Curia in previous years. The "new Catholicism" that Berkouwer envisages stems from the decisive input of the "New theology" with its call to *ressourcement*, that is reappreciation of biblical and patristic sources, and *aggiornamento*, an attitude marked by an openness towards inner renewal and new ways of relating to the world. In Berkouwer's view, contemporary Roman Catholicism is experiencing a "new interpretative phase" of its identity though the outcome of such a process is rather unpredictable. What appears to him as most important are the new emphases endorsed by the Council regarding the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Catholic Church. The insistence on the "pilgrim Church" as the eschatological congregation of the people of God introduces a dynamic element in the traditionally static and hierarchical perception of the Church which has a bearing on (1) the reinterpretation of the Cyprianic dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*, (2) the recognition of other churches outside of Rome, (3) the reconsideration of the unchangeability of dogma and (4) the more nuanced role of magisterial authority. If his pre-Vatican II *Conflict with Rome* centred on the gulf between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies concerning the doctrine of grace, his post-Vatican II *New*

Catholicism revolves around “the ecclesiastical-pneumatological issue”, with particular reference to the guarantee of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church. Of course, Berkouwer is fully aware that these new emphases do not replace old ones but are simply added to the traditional Roman Catholic outlook, thus making the ecumenical agenda with Rome easier, on the one hand, but more nuanced, on the other. Before such a scenario, Berkouwer calls for a “realistic ecumenicity”— an ecumenicity which seeks to overcome past polemical attitudes while waiting further developments within Roman Catholicism.

Cornelius van Til (1895-1987) is the second theologian whose works on Roman Catholicism will be taken into consideration. They are an example of his presuppositional approach to theology which is most interested in addressing the basic *Weltanschauung* which nurtures and sustains a theological vision. Within the range of possible options, Van Til proposes that Roman Catholicism is an alternative system to the classical Reformed framework. Both the "traditional" and "modern" versions of Roman Catholicism, i.e. pre- and post-Vatican II overarching typologies, are in Van Til's perception characterised by a fundamental epistemic flaw which in turn determines all defective aspects of the system. The category of "synthesis" helps Van Til to point out what he understands as the basic epistemological choice made by Roman Catholicism in dealing with the contrasting frameworks of thought it has encountered in its long history. According to Van Til, while traditional Roman Catholicism is the outcome of a synthesis between Aristotle and Christ, modern Catholicism stems from another kind of synthesis, that between Kant and Christ which reiterates the old Aristotle-Christ one and enlarges it in terms of expanding the correlation between the medieval outlook of Roman Catholicism with Western modernity. Following his major concern which lies in apologetics, Van Til explores his clear-cut interpretation by looking at various important domains in which the Roman Catholic synthesis operates, providing a blueprint of the whole system. In his critical assessment of Roman Catholicism, Van Til is less interested in studying the details, tensions and development of the system than in fixing an interpretative grid which enables him to reinforce his general presuppositional orientation. This is both his weakness and strength.

David Wells (b. 1939) is another theologian worth considering in any significant survey on Evangelical approaches to Roman Catholicism after Vatican II. His book *Revolution in Rome* well epitomises an Evangelical sense of bewilderment

with the *aggiornamento* proposed by the Council. The main thrust of his reading of the Council is the observation that Vatican II on some strategic points seems to endorse two “mutually incompatible theologies”, one conservative, the other progressive, one restating tradition, the other pushing beyond tradition. These two conflicting tendencies can be found everywhere in the conciliar texts and contribute to a shaping of its overall theology marked by an unmistakably Catholic “both-and” pattern. Confronted with the inherent stereophony if not cacophony of Vatican II, Wells argues that the Council has practised the “juxtaposition of ideas” in such a way that the reception and interpretation of the final redaction of the documents can be traced both along traditional lines as well as along more innovative ones. In this display of Roman Catholic dialectics, Rome appears to have a “divided mind”. In Wells’ opinion, the Council provokes nothing but a set of questions that remain unanswered but cannot be left unanswered. The book is an expression of Evangelical perplexity in coming to terms with the complexity of the Roman Catholic mindset. The “state of flux” that Wells observes in post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism may not be a temporary compromise between contrasting forces waiting for a final solution but rather the Catholic stable yet dynamic pattern which enables the system to hold together different elements which other theological orientations consider to be incompatible. In considering the interpretative crux of Vatican II, Wells takes the view that the Council depicts a temporary and transient balance which will eventually lead to the affirmation of one party over the other. A similar “wait-and-see” approach pursued by Berkouwer is also advocated by Wells.

Donald Bloesch (b. 1928) suggests a distinction between Catholicism as an ideal type of Christianity stressing the universality of the Christian faith as well as the importance of tradition and Roman Catholicism as a historic type of Christianity with its institutional structure and sacramental outlook. Apart from echoing this vaguely Tillichian train of argument with his own modifications, Bloesch does not go on to explore the theological structures of Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical perspective.

If Berkouwer, Van Til, Wells and Bloesch are Evangelical academic theologians dealing with present-day Roman Catholic trends, Herbert Carson’s writings well represent the less academic but strongly apologetic way of theologising which is current in some Evangelical circles which are chiefly motivated by evangelistic concerns. Whereas Berkouwer and Wells show a degree of suspension

of judgement in dealing with the event and the outcome of the Council, Carson reads it in terms of the *semper eadem* thesis, i.e. the theological structure of Roman Catholicism may have changed its linguistic expression but not its fundamental orientation. According to him, in spite of all appearances, post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism has in no way modified its tridentine, anti-Reformation stance for the simple reasons that, firstly, it has not formally and openly abandoned it and, secondly, the new teaching can be fully harmonised with the old without subverting it. The inevitable conclusion of such a reading is that if Rome is *semper eadem*, the Evangelical approach to Roman Catholicism will be *semper eadem* as well. It is apparent that Carson's analysis is completely lacking ecumenical subtlety and may also present an oversimplified view of a highly complex reality. However, his basic arguments, although surely needing refinement, cannot be easily dismissed. They assume the foundational role of the Council of Trent in the shaping of Roman Catholic dogma and underline that although theological development may augment what has been previously stated by the magisterium, it neither overcomes nor reforms it in any radical way.

John Stott (b. 1921) is the last theologian whose works are dealt with in the exploration of representative theological approaches to contemporary Roman Catholicism from within the Evangelical tradition. While his personal writings on the subject reveal a transition from a confrontation marked by doctrinal controversy to a more engaged attitude characterised by an ecumenical openness, the importance of Stott lies in his involvement in the pioneering dialogue between 1977 and 1984 whose goal was to provide an inter-confessional forum for serious missiological debate. The resulting *Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission* (ERCDOM) was an introductory prelude to other subsequent initiatives. On the whole, while the theological weight of ERCDOM does not break new ground as far as an Evangelical comprehensive analysis is concerned, the initiative itself nonetheless reflects the search for a methodology of dialogue based on mutual respect and commitment to reciprocal listening. The first-fruit of the new season inaugurated by Stott was an emerging attitude which is progressively becoming less hostile and more constructive.

The vast amount of Evangelical work devoted to a theological appraisal of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism testifies to the fact that Evangelicals have been stirred, wittingly or unwittingly, to rethink their stance towards it. Some theologians

have found their previous theological assessments wanting and inadequate in order to come to terms with the developments fostered by the Council, but have not been able to construct an interpretative model which is able to deal with the complex dynamics and composite structures of Roman Catholicism. Others have been unwilling to radically change their basic critique inherited from centuries of confessional controversy and have continued to apply it to a reality which is indeed changing and cannot be simply portrayed using categories inherited from the past.

0.2 New Ventures of Dialogue with Roman Catholicism

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, on the one hand, and the Berlin Congress on Mission (1966) and the Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation (1974), on the other, the previously scant and suspicious relationships between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals received a new impulse. The connection between these two sets of events is not direct, yet both stem from a parallel rediscovery of a zeal for evangelism. This similar missionary agenda enabled both constituencies to find points of convergence, or at least shared concerns, in their attempt to implement the new vision for mission.

Apart from ERCDOM, there has been interaction between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics after Vatican II involving representatives of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity. The background to the current dialogue is the 1986 *Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism* issued after mounting uneasiness within WEF over ecumenical postures had stirred it to appoint a Task Force in order to prepare a statement expressing common Evangelical convictions on Roman Catholicism. In fact, while the document welcomes the new phase that Roman Catholicism is experiencing and hopes that further steps will be made encouraged by the biblical movement, the charismatic movement and the base communities, it reiterates persisting Evangelical concerns over foundational aspects of Roman Catholic doctrine such as Mariology, authority in the Church, the Papacy and infallibility, justification by faith and works, sacramentalism and the Eucharist. The *Perspective* which was the result of an internal controversy has turned out to be the first step in an on-going dialogical initiative. In fact, after receiving a somewhat resentful reaction to it by the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, both WEF and the Council decided to start a theological dialogue focussed on primary matters of mutual interest. So far, four

conversations have taken place in 1993, 1997, 1999 and 2001 touching on such diverse topics as "Justification, Scripture and Tradition", "The Nature and Mission of the Church", "Communion and Cooperation in Mission", and the ecclesiological and ecumenical significance of *koinonia*. Such a dialogue shows the willingness of both parties to listen to one another as they present their respective views. So far, apart from a growth in mutual respect, the prevailing impression is that no substantial theological ground has been broken with regard to possible ecumenical developments nor have there been significant changes in the Evangelical approaches inherited from the broader Evangelical interpretations of Vatican II.

Dialogue seems to be the new element, practically unknown in pre-Vatican II times, in the complex relationships between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. In this preliminary survey of the period inaugurated in the Seventies and whose long-term effects are still in progress, reference has to be made to another independent initiative whose socio-cultural background is the USA. *Evangelicals and Catholics Together* (ECT) is the title of a document released in 1994 but also the name of an on-going informal dialogue whose participants are confessionally divided Christians who share similar concerns for the falling apart of the Christian ethos of American society under the attack of relativistic trends of thought. In this violent "culture war", many Evangelicals and Roman Catholics find themselves fighting on the same conservative side and have discovered a new kind of possible rapprochement, "an ecumenism of the trenches". The convergence, however, is not simply a common view on social issues but is said to be "a theologically rooted alliance" which envisages a common commitment to Christian mission and entails a non-proselytization policy between professing Christians.

Both as a result of the continuation of dialogue and as a response to some evangelical criticism, the ECT architects released another statement in 1997 (*The Gift of Salvation*, GOS) whose aim was intended to elucidate the theological connotations of the unity referred to in ECT. GOS is a courageous attempt to deal with *the* most theologically crucial and historically divisive issue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics: justification by faith. The same sort of pragmatic ecumenism resulting in ECT, has operated in GOS in that this complex matter is dealt with too briefly and vaguely to generate serious debate and reflection. As the whole process demonstrates, Roman Catholicism has become a test-issue for Evangelicals: changes in Evangelical evaluation of Roman Catholicism have far

reaching implications for what it means to be Evangelicals at the dawn of the new millennium. The endeavours in dialogue which Evangelicals are committed to and engaged in show a similar variety of approaches to those noted in the works of individual theologians.

0.3 Towards an Evangelical Systemic Perspective on Roman Catholicism

The state of contemporary Evangelical theological perspectives on Roman Catholicism is extremely fluid and in the process of an on-going development. Hostile resistance based on clichés from the past and undiscerning openness towards ecumenical trends nurtured mainly by “culture war” concerns are the Scilla and Carybdis of the situation. Recent attempts to interact theologically with Roman Catholicism have tended either to favour a mere comparison of aspects of respective theologies⁴ or to focus on theological issues whose strategic importance for what is at stake in the controversy is less than convincing.⁵ While showing a significant interest in dealing with Roman Catholicism in a constructive way, Evangelical theology does not seem to be prepared to address it *as* Roman Catholicism, i.e. a religion enjoying or claiming to enjoy Catholic breadth and vision as well as institutional and historical particularity. In striving for meaningful theological dialogue, Evangelical theology needs a pertinent framework to interpret Roman Catholicism which would reflect its theological identity as well as being able to account for the multifaceted, yet unitary, reality of Roman Catholicism itself. The elaboration of such an Evangelical hermeneutical and theological model should encourage answers to the simple yet crucial questions involving the basic world-view of Roman Catholicism, its goals, methods and vision. This is a task for Evangelical theology which can no longer be

⁴ This is the case of Geisler and MacKenzie (1995). On the whole, the volume is a helpful and fair presentation of both areas of doctrinal agreements and differences between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. Its methodological choice nonetheless prevents it from considering the respective theologies as systems and prefers to compare sections of them in a rather atomistic way. What is basically missing in the book is a systemic approach to the theological differentiation which is able to provide a unified account of both agreements and differences.

⁵ Cf. the collection of essays edited by Armstrong (1994). The second part of the book is devoted to the exploration of the theological issues and it revolves around Mariology, the Saints, Sacerdotalism and different models of spirituality. While recognising the importance of these and other theological themes, it is also possible to argue that they can hardly be considered the fundamental contentious issues from a theological point of view. On the contrary, they reflect the different orientation of

postponed, if the "wait-and-see" approach adopted by Berkouwer and Wells is not to become the certification of an Evangelical lack of theological penetration. In this context, perhaps the Dutch theologian and statesman Abraham Kuyper's approach should be re-examined in order to expand and refine it. In fact, at the end of XIX century, Kuyper developed an analysis of worldviews considering them as systems, i.e. unified yet comprehensive wholes grounded on basic ideological features and influencing all areas of thought and life. For Kuyper, Roman Catholicism is such a system displaying all the essential marks of a properly defined system according to his own theological and cultural hermeneutics. A comparative survey of contemporary and later Roman Catholic scholars and authors shows a significant degree of convergence as far as the interpretation of Roman Catholicism as a system is concerned. Even though the category of system is not used in the same way as Kuyper employed it, the idea that Roman Catholicism is a living religious and institutionalised worldview encompassing the whole spectrum of life and aiming at an increasing universality is strongly advocated in their understanding of what it means for Roman Catholicism to be what it is. Evangelical theology needs to reshape its own perspectives on Roman Catholicism according to a systemic view taking into account its historical trajectory, dogmatic structure, theological dynamics, institutional outlook, and cultural project. Less ambitious approaches are in the end defective ways of relating to it in that they misrepresent the nature of Roman Catholicism *per se* and provide an inadequate interpretation of its universal, yet particular reality.

Closely related to this systemic approach, Evangelical theology may wish to reflect on what is of fundamental importance to the Roman Catholic system and, as a consequence, to an Evangelical theological assessment of it. As has been indicated, the system has a central core which determines its own orientation in all the areas in which it has an interest. This core is a composite one and entails the ways in which the relationship between nature and grace are worked out and the Roman Catholic self-understanding of the Church which is the main subject of the system itself. The Roman Catholic system can be seen as emerging from the range of the nature-grace motifs which are allowed to coexist within it and serve to enrich it, and expressing itself in the paramount role of the Church which is basically understood in

the respective theological frameworks resulting from differing articulations of the nature-grace scheme.

Christological terms as the prolongation of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. Timidly but progressively, this systemic approach which takes into serious consideration the ground-motifs of Roman Catholic theology is beginning to reformulate an Evangelical theological analysis of Roman Catholicism, even though this promising development is still at a very early stage.⁶

On the present ecumenical scene, Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism are the two religious constituencies within Christendom which are showing signs of activism and renewal. Evangelicals can frame a theologically responsible appraisal and engage in constructive dialogue if they are willing to refine their theological approach to Roman Catholicism according to a systemic perspective which will be outlined in the last two chapters of the present research.

⁶ An interesting indication of the willingness to think of Roman Catholicism as a system may be seen in the short document "An Evangelical Approach Towards Understanding Roman Catholicism" (published in English in 2000) by the Istituto di Formazione Evangelica e Documentazione of Padova. The document was endorsed by the Italian Evangelical Alliance.

CHAPTER ONE

EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY: A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

This is a thesis on Evangelical theology. The focus of attention will obviously be on the way Roman Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council has been approached, perceived, and assessed by Evangelical theologians, theological institutions and the Evangelical movement at large. However, the primary subject under analysis will be present-day Evangelical theology even if it is considered from the point of view of its relationship with post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.

The reference to “Evangelical theological perspectives” in the title assumes the existence of a theological tradition and ethos which can in some way described as Evangelical. Evangelical theology cannot, however, be referred to as a given which is self-evident nor can the expression simply be asserted. Though it is feasible to argue that it is possible to appreciate the distinct features of a theology such as the Evangelical one – and the present thesis relies heavily on that basic assumption –, any attempt to discern the profile of the Evangelical theological framework is closely linked to the different meanings associated with the term “Evangelical” and its cognates. The unavoidable starting point in coming to grips with the way in which “Evangelical” is related to theological reflection is indeed the meaning of the word “Evangelical” itself. In other words, the attempt to define the contours of an Evangelical *theology* involves a deeper understanding of the *Evangelical* connotation of that kind of theology. What can be said of “Evangelical” in general can also be applied to Evangelical theology in particular. This fact would seem to suggest that, before trying to examine different Evangelical approaches to present-day Roman Catholicism, it is methodologically wise to qualify those “perspectives” as stemming from Evangelical theology.

1.1 EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY AND EVANGELICALISM

Once the close relationship between Evangelical theology and the wider semantic field of the term Evangelical is established, it becomes necessary to map out what is to be included under its domain. In this respect, even a perfunctory look at the contents of the vast bibliography on the subject of Evangelicalism will show that the task of defining the term is anything but easy for three basic reasons.

First, the increasing vagueness of the use of the word is making its semantic value less and less precise.¹ Especially in the present-day American scene, the word “Evangelical” tends to be seen as “a mute substantive that gains its voice only when coupled to another, and more clarifying, adjective”.² This practical meaninglessness which has affected the other etymologically related words has called for lexical supplementation and has given rise to “a lot of fancy Evangelical hybrids” where Evangelical is combined with adjectives like radical, liberal, charismatic, catholic, liberationist, ecumenicalist, feminist, orthodox, post-,³ and others: a true “semantic potpourri”.⁴ Given this growing taxonomy, the question of whether “Evangelical” in its contemporary connotation is still a “meaningful term” needs to be asked very seriously indeed.⁵ Notwithstanding the elusiveness surrounding the Evangelical vocabulary, there are good reasons for arguing that there is a core of meaning related to “Evangelical” which can be readily pointed out and possibly defined. Even those who are increasingly skeptical on the “perspicuity” and “sufficiency” of the term still defend the possibility of recognising its fundamental thrust.

The second preliminary problem in coming to terms with any indication of the meaning of “Evangelical” is the intrinsic complexity of the reality which the word refers to. In Webber’s words, “the phenomenon known as Evangelicalism is very difficult to pinpoint”⁶ because of the inherent variety of what constitutes it. The metaphors generally used to depict Evangelicalism (an “extended family”, a “coat of many colours”, a “family tree”, a “tribal system”, a “patchwork quilt”, a “mosaic”, a “kaleidoscope” and others)⁷ give an idea of the multiplicity of elements involved in it and the diversity of its important features. Since one is confronted with “varieties of Evangelicalism”,⁸ trying to define it is a “challenge”.⁹ Indeed, Evangelicalism can

¹ On the semantic level, a comment should be also made concerning the overtones that the word “evangelical” can take on different languages. In German “evangelisch” is synonymous of protestant whereas “evangelikal” is associated with groups outside the state church. In Italian too, “evangelico” basically means protestant whereas “evangelicale” is narrower and echoes the English “evangelical”. Cf. Carson (1996) 445-446 and the subtitle of Bolognesi (1997).

² Noll, Plantinga, Wells (1995) 495.

³ As in Tomlinson (1995).

⁴ Carson (1996) 447.

⁵ Davies (1996).

⁶ Webber (1978) 25.

⁷ Tidball (1994) 19-20. For instance, Timothy Smith uses both the expressions “evangelical mosaic” and “evangelical kaleidoscope” (1986).

⁸ Tidball (1994) 19-20.

point to a movement, a spirituality, some Church or para-church institutions, a historical heritage, some doctrinal ^{MARKERS} or emphases, and many other elements which are not perceived to be as mutually incompatible. The inclusive nature of the word poses the problem, even though not an insurmountable one, of the feasibility of using a single word to encompass such a diverse field of reference.

The third difficulty which should be mentioned by way of introductory remarks is the range of interpretative keys, controlling principles, and privileged perspectives which are employed in the attempt to come to terms with the multifaceted nature of Evangelicalism itself. It is not only that the area described as “Evangelical” is complex, but the viewpoints which can be used in approaching it differ significantly. Perhaps, it is a truism to say that the way in which Evangelicalism is viewed largely depends on the set of categories chosen to pursue its analysis. The result is that there is no univocal and comprehensive understanding of Evangelicalism but its appreciations always mirror the chosen viewpoints. Reference to “Evangelical theological perspectives” therefore calls for a preliminary specification of the ways in which the adjectival part of the expression is to be assumed.

1.1.1 Socio-Cultural Categories

As mentioned earlier concerning the multiplicity of possible approaches, Evangelicalism can be the subject of sociological investigation broadly defined whenever it is associated with the idea of a “movement”, be it local, regional, continental or worldwide, composed of denominations, local congregations or voluntary bodies. In fact, the word “movement” rather than Church or Churches is a better description of the phenomenon whose contours are not merely ecclesiastical. From the institutional point of view, present-day Evangelicalism is a network of Churches and para-church agencies, of corporate bodies and influential individual personalities,¹⁰ of small groupings and powerful empires forming together a sort of Evangelical galaxy, a “complex set of impulses .. and organizations”¹¹ or, even better, a “dynamic movement, with common heritages, common tendencies, an

⁹ Carson (1996) 444.

¹⁰ Like the “five evangelical leaders” (J. Packer, J. Stott, M. Lloyd-Jones, F. Schaeffer, B. Graham) by Catherwood (1985).

¹¹ Noll and Kellstedt (1995) 146.

identity, and an organic character”.¹² The movement in itself is composed of many and diversified subjects with no unified structure or centralised organization, even though the Evangelical label fits them all and the Evangelical umbrella is wide enough to include them all. Each component of the Evangelical constituency also plays a significant symbolic role in providing different forms of identification for Evangelicals.

Another aspect which could be highlighted in sociological terms is the composite cultural matrix present in the movement. Whatever the often used expressions “Evangelical mind”¹³ or “Evangelical mind and heart”¹⁴ may mean, they metaphorically indicate the existence of a cultural ethos which is attributable to the Evangelical camp giving it “a strong sense of group identity and of inner cohesion”¹⁵ in spite of institutional fragmentation. Evangelicalism is not only a network of various subjects but also a religious culture or a cluster of subcultures in some way grouped around a common nucleus with varying shades and degrees of differentiation according to the specificity of each subculture. In order to achieve its goal, this socio-cultural kind of analysis takes into account historical influences – like those exerted by the Enlightenment,¹⁶ Scottish common sense philosophy associated with the work of Thomas Reid,¹⁷ American fundamentalism,¹⁸ just to name a few examples - that have contributed to shape a loosely defined Evangelical culture as well as the major trends between modernity and postmodernity which are observable in the contemporary Evangelical scene.¹⁹ In this respect and as far as the American Evangelical culture is concerned, it has been recently suggested that strong factors operating nowadays are “selfism” and “populism”,²⁰ pragmatism and utilitarianism.²¹ Of course, these brief indications are only a small sample of the

¹² Marsden (1984) x.

¹³ Noll (1994).

¹⁴ Erickson (1993).

¹⁵ Bray (1996) 540.

¹⁶ Bebbington (1991).

¹⁷ As argued in McGrath (1996).

¹⁸ Cf., for instance, the masterful works by Marsden (1980) and (1991).

¹⁹ Cf. the critical overview provided by De Chirico (1997).

²⁰ Carson (1996) 461-488. Cf. also Wells (1993), (1994) and Grenz (1995).

²¹ Noll (1994) 12.

numerous possibilities offered by a socio-cultural approach to the challenge of defining Evangelicalism.²²

1.1.2 Historical Categories

The flexibility in the use of the term Evangelicalism can also be noted if preference is granted to an analysis of the historical family-tree of the present-day movement in terms of its genealogy. Whether it is fully conscious or not, Evangelicalism is nonetheless the heir of a long historico-theological tradition or series of traditions which stems from the Reformation but can also be traced in the seventeenth-century orthodoxy (Protestant scholasticism), Puritanism, continental pietism, revivalism, the worldwide missionary movement, classical Pentecostalism, dispensationalism, the early XX century anti-modernism fundamentalist movement, the strongly separatist subsequent neo-fundamentalist offshoots, the neo-evangelical “renaissance” after the Second World War²³ and, more recently, the wide charismatic movement. All these movements are historical instantiations of Evangelicalism but none of them in itself is a complete expression of the Evangelical identity.

The way different authors reconstruct the Evangelical family-tree varies significantly depending on their viewpoints and intentions. For example, Runia prefers a more sober and essential presentation closely linked to the Reformation, Puritanism and the various revival movements,²⁴ whereas Webber draws a more analytical and detailed picture comprising nine historical movements.²⁵ Other proposals could be referred to but they do not change the overall impression of a historiographical convergency. In this respect, the general consensus appears to consider the reformational and the revivalist strands as pivotal for Evangelicalism whereas sharp disagreement arises when it comes to the definition and interpretation of the “fundamentalist phenomenon” and its bearing on Evangelicalism.²⁶ As for its

²² Cf. also Dayton, Johnston (1991), Marsden (1980), Robbins (1990), Noll, Bebbington, Ralwyk (1994), Smith (1998).

²³ As it is called by Bloesch (1973).

²⁴ Runia (1997) 294-295.

²⁵ Webber (1978) 28.

²⁶ The debated issue of the relationship between fundamentalism and evangelicalism would deserve a treatment on its own. The standard literature is Packer (1958), Cohen (1990), Marsden (1980), (1984) and (1991), Carpenter (1997). A recent volume by Harries (1998) tries to revive James Barr’s controversial thesis published in his books *Fundamentalism* (1977) and *Escaping from Fundamentalism* (1984) which has been strongly criticized by evangelical scholars: cf. Lane (1979), Packer

relationship to the history of catholicism, some Evangelical strands are intertwined with it by way of opposition (e.g. the Reformation – Counter Reformation) or parallelism (e.g. the missionary movements, XIX and XX century anti-modernism) or transversal movements which influenced both camps (e.g. present-day charismaticism). Tracing the historical roots of any movement is never a neutral exercise. More specifically, arguing for a rich historical basis of the Evangelical heritage may mean that Evangelicalism is not a naïveté nor the product of a sectarian framework of thought. In Stott's words, because of its precious historical pedigree, Evangelical theology is not “a new-fangled ‘ism’, a modern brand of Christianity, but an ancient form, indeed the original one”.²⁷ This ambitious remark on originality surpasses mere historical considerations and demands a theological justification.

1.1.3 Theological Categories Proper

Beside socio-cultural and historical kinds of analysis, Evangelicalism must be defined in terms of what Evangelicals believe. According to Wells, “evangelicals have always been *doctrinal* people”,²⁸ “confessionally” identifiable, though in his analysis this is less and less true in the contemporary movement increasingly dominated by “transconfessional” and non-theological impulses and by a form of spirituality with a vague theological content.²⁹ In the midst of a growing uneasiness concerning the viability of a theological criterion and a consequent emphasis on non-theological factors in indicating the essence of the Evangelical identity,³⁰ credit should be given to Marsden's claim that Evangelicalism is also, and legitimately so, a “conceptual unity”³¹ where this expression can be another way of saying a doctrinally definable entity. In order to appreciate this confessional dimension, there are at least three different perspectives (biblical, doctrinal and confessional) which

(1985) and Silva (1998). Harries' arguments are as unconvincing as Barr's but her bibliography on fundamentalism is extremely useful; cf. Harries (1998) 340-372.

²⁷ Stott (1970) 33. In the same book, Stott argues that evangelical Christianity is “theological”, “biblical”, “original” and “fundamental”, 27-46.

²⁸ Wells (1987) 22 (*italics in the original*).

²⁹ By “transconfessional”, Wells means the emergence of concerns for strategies, money and power which replace the importance of theological belief: Wells. “On being evangelical” (1994). Cf. also Wells (1993) and *God in the Wasteland* (1994).

³⁰ As in Lints (1993) 30-31. Cf. also D. Carson (1996) 453-458 where he helpfully discusses Lints' arguments.

³¹ Marsden (1980) ix.

provide a more distinctly theological connotation of Evangelicalism and which are most helpful in coming to terms with what constitutes Evangelical theology itself.

Following a biblical focus, Evangelicalism can be approached via the “evangel”, that is by closely connecting what is described as Evangelical to its etymological root. This approach demands that the meaning of the “evangel” be spelt out in order to ascertain the boundaries of the movement which it has originated, at least linguistically. According to one of the most influential Evangelical theologians of the second half of the century, Carl Henry, “the evangel is the momentous Biblically-attested good news that God justifies sinners who for spiritual and moral salvation rely on the substitutionary person and work of Jesus Christ”.³² Assuming this compact and propositional definition entailing a bibliology, a theology *strictu sensu*, a hamartiology, a soteriology and a christology, Evangelicalism can be seen as the movement which embodies the “biblical gospel”³³ understood Evangelically. Evangelical theology, moreover, grounds its legitimacy in the same “gospel” by being a reflection on the “evangel” aimed at confession, nourishment and mission. In this sense, John Stott is partially warranted in describing Evangelicals as being both “Bible Christians” and “gospel Christians”.³⁴

From a more doctrinal point of view, Evangelicalism can be rightly associated with the tenets articulated within the western tradition of Reformation-revivalist theology. Marsden, who defends the idea of Evangelicalism as a “conceptual unity”, also provides a summary of the propositionally worded doctrinal emphases typically endorsed in Evangelical circles: “the final authority of Scripture”, “the real, historical character of God’s saving work recorded in Scripture”, “eternal salvation through personal trust in Christ”, the importance of “evangelism and missions” and the reality of a “spiritually transformed life”.³⁵ Though Evangelicals may differ significantly on the precise understanding of these doctrines and the way

³² Henry, “Who are the Evangelicals?” in Kantzer and Henry (1990) 75.

³³ Cf. D. Carson, “The Biblical Gospel” in Brady and Rowdon (1996) 75-85.

³⁴ Stott (1977).

³⁵ Marsden (1984) ix-x. A similar approach is taken by France and McGrath when they argue that the “shape” of Evangelicalism is given by “the authority and sufficiency of Scripture”, “the uniqueness of redemption through the death of Christ upon the cross”, “the need for personal salvation” and “the necessity, propriety and urgency of evangelism”: France, McGrath (1993) 3. Elsewhere, McGrath speaks of six characteristics: “the supreme authority of Scripture”, “the majesty of Jesus Christ”, “the lordship of the Holy Spirit”, “the need for personal conversion”, “the

in which they interact in their system of beliefs taken as a whole, these foundational doctrines form a kind of Evangelical theological axis generally accepted.

As will be argued later, the Evangelical doctrinal profile can be recognised in its essence but its precise definition may be subject to diverging opinions. The recurrent risk is, as Lloyd-Jones points out, to be “too narrow” and therefore to restrict the definition or “so loose”³⁶ as to enlarge it excessively.³⁶ In fact, narrower or broader approaches than Marsden’s have been pursued by adopting the same doctrinal criterion but with a more focussed thrust. For instance, Evangelical theology may be thought of either as being rooted in the “formal principle” of the authority of Scripture and the “material principle” of the doctrine of justification by faith alone interpreted extensively to include the broader historic protestant soteriology³⁷ or as adhering to the four *sola* defended by Luther: *sola gratia, sola fide, sola scriptura, solus Christus* later expanded in confessional forms.³⁸ The merits of such possibilities are indisputable in that they clearly place Evangelical theology in a distinctly protestant historical framework. Their weaknesses, however, lie in the omission of the other reference point which is intrinsic to Evangelicalism. By underlining the reformational pole, these proposals do not fully account for the revivalist development within Evangelicalism with its emphases on personal experience of salvation, the work of the Holy Spirit and the zeal for evangelism. Another example of the recognition of the doctrinal connotation of Evangelicalism is the five-fold fundamentalist distinctiveness whereby five “fundamental” doctrines were insisted upon. These doctrines were the verbal inspiration of the Bible, the virgin birth of Christ, his substitutionary atonement, his bodily resurrection and his imminent second coming. Here again, the specific fundamentalist-modernist context of this valuable summary limits its comprehensiveness by curtailing other significant aspects of Evangelical identity. Moreover, always by way of general assessment, the indication of the Evangelical core can be too limiting or broad like the picture given by Runia when he argues that the doctrinal essentials of the Evangelical movement are the confession of the “Holy Scripture as the Word of

priority of evangelism” and “the importance of the christian community”: McGrath (1994) 53-80.

³⁶ Lloyd-Jones (1989).

³⁷ As in D. Carson, “Evangelicals, Ecumenism and the Church” in Kantzer and Henry (1990) 349-354. Lloyd-Jones (1989) too insists on the “formal principle” as the principle by which all things must be constantly brought back to the Bible.

³⁸ As in Webber (1978) 26.

God”, of “Jesus Christ and his saving work” and the “missionary task of the people of God”.³⁹ In view of all these rather defective proposals, Marsden’s summary previously referred to proves to be the most plausible and balanced of all.

The third perspective which deserves consideration in seeking to formulate the theological categories in order to come to terms with Evangelicalism is the confessional articulation of the movement. The common theological axis where Evangelical theology finds its basic identity is one thing; the specific theological constructions built on the same axis are quite another - each one having its own particularity, set of emphases and traditions. Within Evangelical theology there is a wide range of distinct confessional families which Grudem helpfully lists as follows: “Anglican/Episcopalian, Arminian/Wesleyan/Methodist, Baptist, Dispensational, Lutheran, Reformed/Presbyterian, Renewal/Charismatic/Pentecostal”.⁴⁰ In so far as all these theological traditions, some of which are far from being exclusively Evangelical (e.g. Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed and charismatic), revolve with different degrees around the characteristic poles of the Reformation and the subsequent revivals as summarised in typically Evangelical doctrinal statements, they can be deemed as confessional branches of the same Evangelical tree.⁴¹ In other words, Evangelical theology includes a pluralistic confessional configuration within a single, broad, essential theological framework based on the Evangelical “evangel”.

1.1.4 Ecclesiastical Categories

In a previous section, reference was made to the fact that Evangelicalism is better understood in terms of a movement rather than an ecclesiastical body. In this sense, Evangelicalism contains the churchly dimension but cannot be reduced to it because of its cumbersome para-church structures which are not anti-ecclesial *per se* but are not strictly ecclesial either. Nonetheless, the ecclesiastical element is of fundamental importance in attempting to grasp its institutional configuration.

In this respect, Evangelicalism presents what appears to be a unique feature within Christendom in terms of ecclesiological self-awareness and ecclesiastical patterns. From its protestant historico-theological roots, it has inherited the

³⁹ Runia (1997) 296-302.

⁴⁰ Grudem (1996) 17.

⁴¹ The issue whether “Evangelical” should be considered the noun or the adjective with respect to “anglican”, “lutheran”, “baptist” and so on, is an open one. Beyond

denominational concept and practice of the Church whereby the Church can be “denominated” in various ways while retaining its essential unity. Within the same confessional family there can be many denominational bodies which can trace their origin not only to broadly theological or strictly ecclesiological issues, but also to geographical, historical, linguistic, social and personal ones. Evangelicalism is formed by a galaxy of ecclesiastical denominations and local independent congregations and by a constellation as wide and complex of transdenominational or nondenominational para-church agencies and institutions. Moreover, as France and McGrath recall, not only there is an Evangelical denominational plurality but Evangelicalism is also a cross-fertilizing “*trend within the mainstream denominations*”,⁴² not exclusively in mainline protestantism. In this respect, it is interesting to notice the impact of this Evangelical trend within Roman Catholicism whereby the catholic and Evangelical identities interact and give rise to the new phenomenon consisting in the increasing number of people who, especially in North America, call themselves “evangelical catholics”.⁴³ From its variegated ecclesiastical outlook, Evangelicalism represents “an *ecumenical* movement”,⁴⁴ much more so than any other “branch” of the Church.⁴⁵

1.1.5 Composite Categories

The evidence gathered so far points to the sheer complexity of contemporary Evangelicalism. In turn, it has become clear that the possibility of understanding this manifold phenomenon surpasses any attempt to confine it to a single criterion, be it socio-cultural, historical, theological or ecclesiastical. Each perspective sheds some indispensable light on the subject but it is not sufficient to provide an outlook which is wholly satisfactory. A single category, be it rigorously applied and even thoroughly developed, cannot enable the researcher to come to terms with “the varieties of evangelicalism”. In confronting the multiple typologies of Evangelicalism, a strategic methodological choice would be to consider “a mixture of beliefs and practices as the defining genius of evangelicalism”.⁴⁶ In other words,

grammatical metaphors, should “evangelical” denote the confessional tradition or should it be the reverse?

⁴² France and McGrath (1993) 4-5.

⁴³ Cf. Fournier (1990).

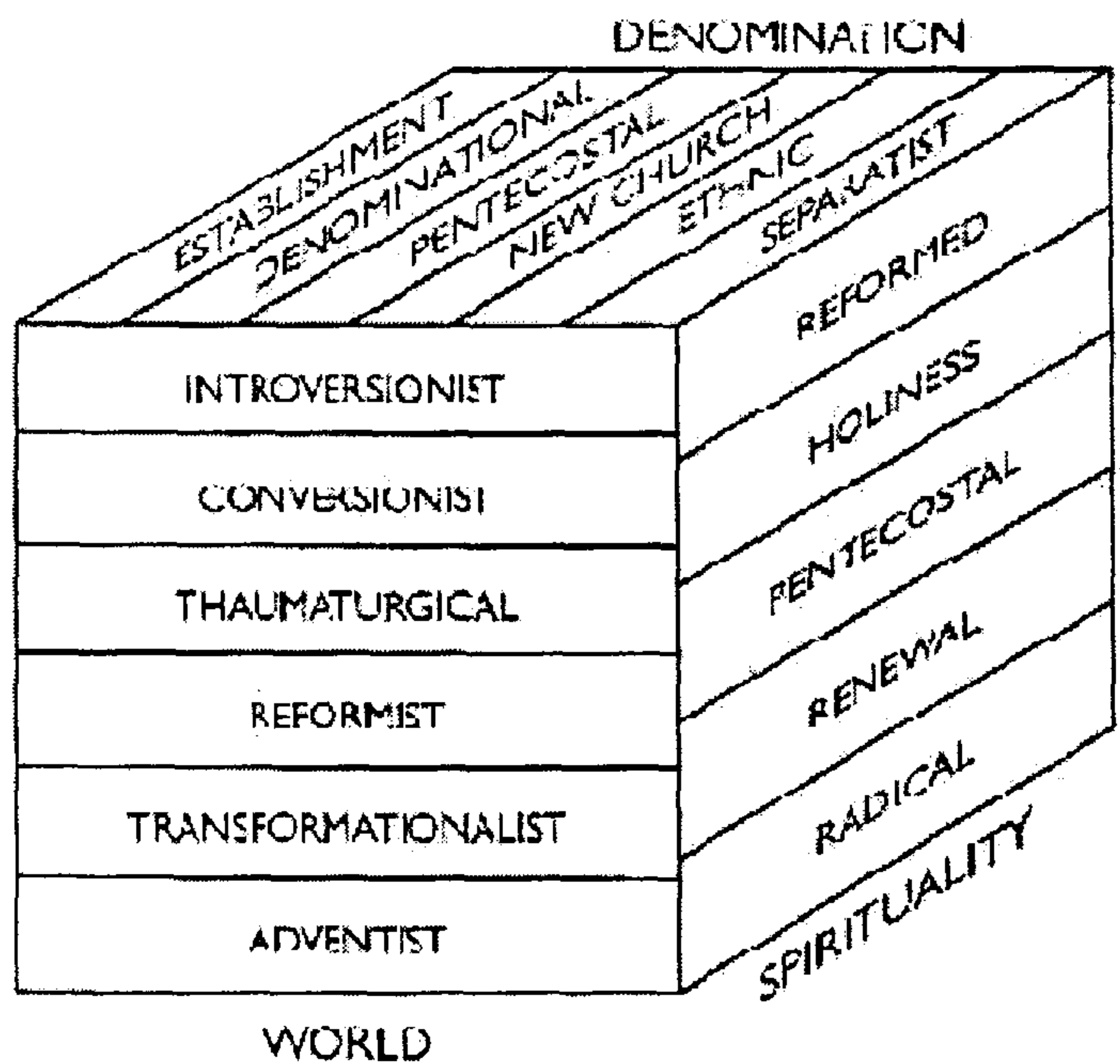
⁴⁴ France and McGrath (1993) 5.

⁴⁵ Bray (1996) 554.

⁴⁶ Carson (1996) 449.

what is needed is a composite set of categories capable of making sense of and accounting for the inner Evangelical multiformity. The aim of such a combined attempt would be to hold together different points of view so as to provide a less limited understanding of Evangelicalism itself.

The most frequently quoted proposal as far as an integrated approach is concerned is Bebbington’s “quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism”.⁴⁷ In Bebbington’s analysis, Evangelicalism results from the intersection of four special marks: “*conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross”.⁴⁸ It should be pointed out that not all these categories are theological, nor are they strictly socio-cultural. Instead, they are a mixture of theological, spiritual and social Evangelical ^{TRAITS} forming what might be called an Evangelical ethos.⁴⁹ A more recent and intriguing tentative suggestion is the “Rubik’s cube” designed by Tidball where the key ingredients of Evangelicalism are sketched out:⁵⁰



⁴⁷ e.g. Noll (1994) 8; Barclay (1997) 10-12.

⁴⁸ Bebbington (1989) 2-3 (italics in the original). Bebbington explains the “quadrilateral” on pp. 2-19. Cf. also his “Towards an evangelical identity” in Brady, Rowdon (1996) 37-48 and “Evangelicalism: Britain” in McGrath (1993) 183-187.

⁴⁹ A critique of Bebbington’s approach can be found in Carson (1996) 449-451.

⁵⁰ Tidball (1994) 21.

The cube is based on three main variables: the denominational set up, the relationship to the world and the kinds of spirituality enhanced. There are many possible combinations of the different variables and they can account, at least to a certain extent, for Evangelical diversity. Here again, the chosen dimensions are mixed as in Bebbington's thesis. Perhaps it is along these refined composite lines that the challenge of defining Evangelicalism could be met most thoroughly and pursued most constructively. Any serious survey of what pertains to Evangelical theology should attempt to follow this multifaceted approach.

1.2 THE STATE OF EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY

From what has been argued in the preceding section, Evangelical theology cannot be thought apart from the reality of Evangelicalism. More precisely, Evangelical theology can be considered as the theological consciousness of the Evangelical movement.⁵¹ If the latter defies analysis, the former is also resistant to clear-cut pictures and simplistic outlooks.

The Evangelical theological world is very active. In the contemporary scene, after the fundamentalist parenthesis marked by a clear display of "hostility towards academic theology",⁵² the last thirty years have witnessed a kind of "Evangelical renaissance"⁵³ even as far as theology is concerned. The "past defensiveness" has been replaced by an apparent openness towards the theological *agorà* and a renewed commitment to scholarly work. Prejudicial refusal has changed or is changing to constructive contribution if it is true that, as Bray argues, from the 1970s onwards Evangelicals can speak "with a confident voice to the scholarly community".⁵⁴ Nowadays, there are fellowships of professional theologians,⁵⁵ large theological

⁵¹ Introductory readings on evangelical theology are Bloesch (1983), Wells (1983), Anderson (1989), Lightner (1990), Grenz and Olson (1992) 286-309, Vanhoozer (1995).

⁵² McGrath (1996) 10-22.

⁵³ Bloesch (1973). Cf. also McGrath (1994) 9-48 and Barclay (1997). Of course, the picture is not a black and white one. The fundamentalist legacy is still much influential at least in American Evangelicalism; cf. Noll (1994).

⁵⁴ Bray (1996) 541.

⁵⁵ e.g. in USA, the *Evangelical Theological Society* (from 1949); in Europe, the *Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians*; worldwide, the *Theological Commission of the World Evangelical Fellowship*.

seminaries⁵⁶ and academically respected research institutions,⁵⁷ scholarly theological journals,⁵⁸ and serious theological publishing houses⁵⁹ which produce an increasing amount of theological literature written by Evangelical scholars.⁶⁰ These data, however, should not foster a mistaken picture. In fact, the quantitative explosion of theological activity does not mean that Evangelical theology is having an appreciable impact on the wider theological scene.⁶¹ The evidence points to the persistent marginality of Evangelical theology within the context of the dominant trends in theology today. More than that, it can be argued that even its influence on the Evangelical movement itself is rather limited in that, according to Wells' critique, the main driving forces are actually non-theological impulses. Beyond these otherwise necessary considerations which cannot be pursued further here, it is instead important to come back to the issue of the essential features of Evangelical theology, granted its existence.

1.2.1 The Role of the "Essentials" and the Importance of the "Centre"

In the reflection of many Evangelical theologians on the scope of their theological task, a recurrent theme is the tentative identification of the "heart"⁶² of a theology which could be denoted as Evangelical. Against the background of the variability of Evangelicalism, what are the commonalities of the theological framework emerging from such a fragmented yet somehow unified camp? The literature already referred to provides a hint as regards to the theological self-awareness of those Evangelicals engaged in theological work. The indications seem to point to the fact that Evangelical theology cannot be thought of apart from its "essentials"⁶³ and that these "essentials" are of paramount importance in defining the Evangelical theological

⁵⁶ e.g. in USA, Westminster Theological Seminary, Fuller Theological Seminary, Reformed Theological Seminary; in UK, London Bible College.

⁵⁷ e.g. Tyndale House (Cambridge) founded in 1944. Cf. the celebrative volume edited by Satterthwaite and Wright (1995).

⁵⁸ e.g. in USA, *Westminster Theological Journal*, *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*; in UK, *Tyndale Bulletin*; in France, *La Revue Réformée*; in Italy, *Studi di teologia*; worldwide, *Themelios*, *Evangelical Review of Theology*.

⁵⁹ e.g. in USA, Eerdmans, Baker, Zondervan; in UK, IVP, Paternoster.

⁶⁰ In this respect, two works edited by Elwell are indicative: the *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (1984) and the *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (1993).

⁶¹ As argued by Noll, Plantinga, Wells (1995).

⁶² Thompson (1995).

⁶³ Cf. Bloesch (1978-1979), Runia (1997).

profile. The vocabulary on the basic “familial consensus”⁶⁴ can vary. Others prefer to speak of distinct “foundations”⁶⁵ which, in turn, are deemed to function as “essential” or “fundamental”⁶⁶ criteria for recognising a theology as Evangelical. Of course, what is “essential” may slightly or significantly change from theologian to theologian and the preceding discussion on the doctrinal categories in order to come to terms with Evangelicalism has shown the different accents and emphases given to the definitions of what is constitutive for the Evangelical faith. However, the acknowledgement of the strategic role of the “essentials” is a matter of quasi, overarching consensus. By way of necessary implication, beside what is “essential”, Evangelical theology discerns the “*adiaphora*, matters of indifference”,⁶⁷ or, in Lloyd-Jones’ words, “secondary truths” which do not lie at the heart of Evangelicalism but are expressions of diverging understandings of the biblical message within the movement itself. If Roman Catholicism has eventually adopted the Second Vatican Council’s teaching concerning the “hierarchy of truths”, Evangelical theology instead tends to make a distinction between primary and secondary doctrines, essential and non-essential ones, foundations and *adiaphora*.

Yet another metaphor has to be highlighted in these introductory remarks on the state of Evangelical theology. What is deemed “essential” gives rise to a spatial metaphor: the “centre”.⁶⁸ In other words, the space inhabited and delimited by the “essentials” forms the core of a theology like the Evangelical one. Evangelical theology testifies to a significant convergence at the “centre” whereas the periphery is characterised by a conflicting plurality of theological options. The former demands rigidity, the latter warrants flexibility. The institutional fragmentation, the historical diversity, the ecclesiastical pluralism of Evangelicalism is somehow compensated by the relative theological uniformity on the so-called essentials of the Evangelical faith. The “centre” has a “determinative” function in distinguishing Evangelical from non-Evangelical theologies as well as a “regulative” function in allowing the recognition of what is primary, foundational, non-negotiable elements from secondary, confessionally conditioned features within Evangelical theology itself.

⁶⁴ Olson (1998) 40.

⁶⁵ Davies (1984), Lloyd-Jones (1989) 336, Bolognesi (1992).

⁶⁶ Stott (1970) 42-46.

⁶⁷ France and McGrath (1993) 3 (*italics in the original*).

⁶⁸ France and McGrath (1993) 3.

A further point should be made in this respect. The insistence on the “essentials” leads to a series of important implications. It suggests, firstly, that Evangelical theology is devoted to the maintenance of theological “orthodoxy” inasmuch as the “essentials” are nothing but theological statements that strive to remain true to Scripture and to the heritage of the Church, especially as it was set forth in the Reformation and the subsequent protestant tradition. Here again, a point of contact with the Roman Catholic concern with regards to “orthodoxy” may be noted though the respective understandings of what it means to remain true to the Bible and the place of tradition differ considerably. Unlike other streams of protestantism, however, Evangelical theology is committed to operating within the boundaries of orthodoxy and in the service of orthodoxy. Secondly, because of the stress on the “essentials”, Evangelical theology is often and rightly indicated as having a rather conservative theological orientation, “conservative” meaning a defensive but also a constructive attitude.⁶⁹ The cherishing of the fundamental doctrines, in fact, demands the rigorous commitment to the “essentials” and prevents Evangelical theology from departing or deviating from that given “deposit”. Since the doctrinal “foundations” function as the controlling-principle in theological reflection, Evangelical theology assumes a rather conservative outlook in attempting to preserve and value them. The “essentials” cannot be dismissed and have to be safeguarded in order to maintain Evangelical integrity. Positively, Evangelical theology considers as its continuous task the bringing out and appreciation of the unchanging “essentials”. In this sense, Evangelical “conservativism” has a pro-active overtone in taking a leading role in the shaping of the Evangelical theological agenda.

In the end, Evangelical theology can be distinguished from other theological orientations because of its insistence on the Evangelical “essentials” of the Christian faith and therefore of Christian theology. Moreover, Evangelical theology can truly be a theology that crosses confessional and ecclesiastical allegiances and alignments because of its emphasis on “essentials” which can be found in many theological traditions.

1.2.2 The Kinds and Degrees of Diversity Within Evangelical Theology

⁶⁹ Cf. N. Cameron (1995) 237-256.

Underlining the “essentials” is only one aspect which qualifies Evangelical theology as a coherent theological tradition. There is another feature that should not be played down. Just as important as the awareness of the role of the “foundations” is the realisation of the inherent diversity within Evangelical theology itself. This means that its basic cohesion should not be thought of at the expense of its manifoldness. Bearing in mind this dialectical combination of “centre” and diversity, Runia correctly argues that while “it is definitely possible to speak of an Evangelical theology, at least as far as the main tenets of the Christian faith are concerned”,⁷⁰ at the same time “it is impossible to speak of a *united* and *uniform* Evangelical theology”.⁷¹ As Evangelical theology is the theological consciousness of a composite, pluralist and worldwide movement, theological differences and contrasts are an essential part of its inner constitution. There are basically two areas in which the diversity is most obvious: the realm of the doctrinal outlook of Evangelical theology and the attitude, mood and orientation of theological work.

Firstly, the diversity inevitably arises out of the controversies related to the precise definition of what is “essential” and how the “essentials” are to be theologically articulated,⁷² the acknowledgment that what are supposed to be matters of indifference are often divisive, contentious issues which are treated as primary,⁷³ and also the admission that the distinction between “essentials” and *adiaphora* sometimes fades away because of confessional impulses which tend to question it. The plurality of theological options is especially evident in ecclesiology and eschatology. As far as the former is concerned, the relationship between the spiritual unity of all believers and the visible, institutional, ecclesial aspect of that unity is a matter of profound divergence. Similarly debated issues are the shape of Church government, the nature and practice of the sacraments, the role of women in the Christian ministry, the relations with non-Evangelical established Churches or non-Evangelical wings of the same Church, the place of Evangelicals with respect to the ecumenical movement. As for eschatology, there is much disagreement on some features of this doctrine like the understanding of the millennium and the eternal fate of human beings.

⁷⁰ Runia (1997) 304.

⁷¹ Runia (1997) 293 (italics in the text).

⁷² e.g. the issue whether or not “inerrancy” is an essential part of the Evangelical doctrine of the inspiration of the Bible.

Secondly, the differences within Evangelical theology revolve round the theological mindset and method of those involved in theological work. According to Olson, who is aware of the risk of oversimplification in proposing it, a distinction has to be made between “traditionalists” and “reformists” as regards to their differing approaches towards “*theological boundaries, the nature of doctrine, progress in theology, and relating to nonevangelical theologies and culture in general*”.⁷⁴ In this black and white view, the former see the Church as “bounded set” whereas the latter as “centered set”, doctrine is either considered as “revelation” or “interpretation”, postmodernism is perceived as an “enemy” or a “dialogue partner”. Certainly, the “two party-system” can be named and understood in other ways and with other nuances. For instance, Erickson (a traditionalist himself) defines the reformist wing as “left” or “post-conservative”⁷⁵ Evangelicalism whereas Grenz (belonging instead to the reformist rank) prefers to refer to it as a “revisionist”⁷⁶ attitude with respect to the “older” or “established” Evangelicalism. However plausible such a clear cut analysis is, nobody would question the fact that the Evangelical theological camp is split over fundamental issues of theological method which influence the whole theological enterprise and make it possible to discern a wide spectrum of Evangelical theologies within the broad Evangelical tradition. The reality of diverging sensitivities and contrasting mindsets impinges on the present state and future prospects of Evangelical theology⁷⁷ but it is also a characteristic feature of Evangelical theology in its historical and confessional profiles. As Oden convincingly puts it, the tension “between memory and imagination, tradition and renewal, gift and task”⁷⁸ is indeed perennial for Christian theology in general and also constitutive for Evangelical theology in particular.

⁷³ e.g. the debate between “arminian” and “reformed” traditions within Evangelicalism.

⁷⁴ Olson (1998) 41 (italics in the original). Cf. the critical responses to Olson’s analysis by Clark Pinnock, Thomas Oden and Timothy George published in the same issue of *Christianity Today*. On the same debate, cf. Stackhouse (1999). An interesting case-study on how different mindsets operate would be the evangelical appraisals of Barth’s theology and legacy as examined by Bolich (1980).

⁷⁵ Erickson (1997).

⁷⁶ Cf. Grenz (1993) and (1994).

⁷⁷ While McGrath (1994) looks at Evangelicalism as an essential part of the future of Christianity, Armstrong and others present a dooming picture speaking of “the coming evangelical crises”; cf. Armstrong (1996).

⁷⁸ Cf. Olson (1998) 46.

1.3 EVANGELICAL THEOLOGY AND ROMAN CATHOLICISM

As was argued at the beginning of this introductory chapter, “Evangelical theological perspectives on Roman Catholicism” implies that there is such a thing as Evangelical theology from which different “perspectives” derive. In spite of the complexity surrounding the reality of Evangelicalism, it is cautiously possible but fully legitimate to speak of an Evangelical theology and therefore of “Evangelical theological perspectives”. The rest of the research will be devoted to the study of those perspectives particularly referred to post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. The theologians who will be encountered can be recognised as Evangelical in the above sense and can be fitted into the roughly sketched picture; of course, each theologian interprets Evangelical theology in his own way as well as having his own specificity which goes beyond his allegiance to Evangelicalism but never against it. The same will be true as far as the institutions which will be encountered are concerned. The focus on their theological work, however, will be restricted to their interest in Roman Catholicism.

Two criteria will be followed in choosing and assessing Evangelical exponents: their representativeness within the map of Evangelical theology and the relative consistency of their reflection on Roman Catholicism. Apart from individual theologians, attention will be given to the works on Roman Catholicism promoted under the aegis of the worldwide institutional umbrella for a significant number of Evangelicals, the *World Evangelical Alliance*, as well as to two recent documents originated from the on-going Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogue in USA. The research will attempt to indicate in what respect “Evangelical theological perspectives on Roman Catholicism” deserve to be taken into account.

CHAPTER TWO

ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN THE WORKS OF SOME DISTINGUISHED EVANGELICAL THEOLOGIANS

Vatican II (1962-1965) is widely regarded as one of the most significant events of the Twentieth century. Beside the immense influence exerted on Roman Catholic theology and life, the Council which has brought *aggiornamento* to the Roman Catholic Church, has also stirred Evangelicals to *aggiornamento* in their perception and evaluation of Roman Catholicism and their interaction with individual Catholics and Catholic agencies. Following Vatican II, deeply entrenched preconceptions which had accompanied centuries of confessional controversy and polemical attitudes were questioned by a reinvigorated Catholicism which forced non-Catholics to reposition their stance towards it as well as encouraging Roman Catholics to re-think their relationship towards other Christians. This is particularly true as far as the Evangelical movement *vis-à-vis* Roman Catholicism is concerned. The history of the last forty years is the story of how the challenge to rethink Evangelical-Catholic relationships has been worked out by Evangelicals in the light of the new phase inaugurated at the Council and presents the opportunity to reflect on the hermeneutical criteria ^{USED} by Evangelicals in their theological assessment of Roman Catholicism.

2.1 GERRIT C. BERKOUWER

Within the rank of contemporary Evangelical theologians, Gerrit Berkouwer is perhaps the best known in theological circles outside the Evangelical movement. This external acknowledgement is primarily to be attributed to the prominent theological substance of his work. It is especially through the fairly wide circulation of his *Studies in Dogmatics* and its involvement in the theological

debates within the ecumenical movement¹ that Berkouwer has come to the fore as more than a peripheral character in the contemporary theological scene both in Europe and in America between the Fifties and the mid-Seventies. The Vatican was no exception in recognising his manifold expertise, and of his solid acquaintance with Catholic theology. Thus, it should not be surprising that, albeit representing a relatively small Reformed denomination in the Netherlands, the *Gereformeerde Kerken*, he has been the only Evangelical theologian who was invited by Pope John XXIII to be an official observer to the Second Vatican Council.²

A thorough assessment of Berkouwer's theological significance and legacy is beyond the scope of the present research.³ The concern here is to attempt to grasp the main directives of his life-long passionate and scholarly interest in Roman Catholicism.

To start with, this segment of Berkouwer's *opus* must not be considered as if it were a detachable or secondary aspect of his immense dogmatic effort. Rather, apart from his three specific books on Catholicism between 1948 and 1964,⁴ even a quick glance at the indexes of his already mentioned eighteen volumes of *Studies in Dogmatics* would clearly show that the problem of Roman Catholicism lies at the very nucleus of his work as a dogmatician.⁵ This impression is fully confirmed if the preliminary search is extended to his other

¹ Whilst recognising his sincere ecumenical interests, defining Berkouwer as "an important ecumenical theologian", as Cameron does (1993) 223, sounds an improper overstatement. After all, Berkouwer always uplifted his confessional allegiance and devoutly worked within a distinctive Dutch Reformed framework. In this respect, Smedes rightly speaks of him as "a man so congenially committed to Reformed confessionalism" (1966) 63.

² As reported in the Translator's Preface to *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (1965) 5.

³ For that purpose, cf. Cameron (1993). Smedes (1969), Anderson (1989), and Watts (1993) offer instead useful preliminary introductions to his theology.

⁴ *The Conflict with Rome* (1958); *Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought* (1958), and *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism* (1965). Hereafter, they will be indicated as CWR, RDRCT, and SVCNC respectively.

⁵ e.g. *General Revelation* (1955) 61-83; *The Providence of God* (1952) 36-45 and 216-220; *Faith and Justification* (1954) 125-127 and 94-100; *Faith and*

major writings: whether brilliantly assessing Barth's theological enterprise,⁶ or competently overviewing the 20th century theological movements and motives,⁷ references to Roman Catholic authors or teaching are easily traceable throughout the discourse.⁸ Of course, though unavoidable, this is not the only element which is inherently constitutive of the whole of Berkouwer's work; yet without dealing with it within the wide range of Berkouwer's dogmatic, biblical and historical *loci* of interest, one cannot begin to come to grips with his theology.

Having said that, a strategic procedural choice has to be made in terms of appraising his contribution particularly as it is articulated in the three specific books on Roman Catholicism. Berkouwer's work spans the period of time preceding as well as following the beginning of the Vatican II,⁹ and this chronological factor has significant implications in the sharpening of his critique; in fact, a close examination of the writings in question leads to the ascertainment of a subtle but evident development in the critical perspective, especially between CWR and SVCNC. A clear-cut polarization between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism is the backbone of the former, whereas the recognition of new ecumenical possibilities is suffused in the latter. One is at times harshly apologetical, the other is throughout sympathetically dialogical. Between the two books, of course, there has been the Council which responded to as well as encouraged a new climate both within Roman Catholicism and outside of it. Thus, the diachronic perusal has to be preferred to a mere synchronic one, and the two main phases in Berkouwer's assessment, though closely related, have to be considered in succession.

Sanctification (1956) 27-44 and 78-83; *Man: The Image of God* (1962) 162-168; *The Sacraments* (1969) 24-42; 56-89 and 142-144.

⁶ *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth* (1956).

⁷ *A Half Century of Theology: Movements and Motives* (1977).

⁸ e.g. in *The Triumph of Grace* (1956) a whole chapter deals with Barth's "antithesis to Rome", 166-195; in *A Half Century of Theology* (1977), Berkouwer discusses the Roman Catholic debate over hermeneutical issues, 215-230.

⁹ This aspect of Berkouwer's work is somehow paralleled by the books on Catholicism written by the Waldensian theologian Vittorio Subilia who published one before and the other after the Vatican II (1962 and 1967).

2.1.1 *The Conflict with Rome* and the “struggle for the gospel of free sovereign grace”

One peculiar feature of CWR is the methodological principle which drives Berkouwer in the theological exposition of the conflict between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism.¹⁰ According to Berkouwer, to focus on the struggle with Roman Catholicism essentially means being concerned with "fundamental questions"¹¹ entailing "the structure of Rome in its entirety",¹² and its "basic religious motive".¹³ Though aware of the danger of analytical superficiality and unwarranted schematisation of complex theological data,¹⁴ Berkouwer is strongly convinced that "atomistic"¹⁵ or "fragmentary"¹⁶ insights on Roman Catholicism would inevitably miss the point of the controversy which caused the Reformation and still legitimates the huge gulf that separates the two traditions. In this respect, "the countless conflicts between Rome and the Reformation" can and must be reduced "to one single denominator",¹⁷ penetrating "the *heart* of religion".¹⁸ All complex phenomenology of the battle has but a single aetiology; indeed, the various burning issues of the debate are nothing but "illustrations of the one fundamental conflict"¹⁹ which has progressively ramified in "every department of life".²⁰ In a rather preliminary but unequivocal way, Berkouwer

¹⁰ In mentioning Protestantism, Berkouwer does not present an idealised picture of it nor does he overlook its profound divisions. On the contrary, he stands out from "the modernist, Neo-Protestant religion" which has removed itself entirely from "the basic motives of the Reformation" coming to "a fundamental conflict with it"; cf. CWR, 71 and 213. Berkouwer would rather be identified with the "Old Protestantism". On "Old and New Protestantism" cf. also his *Modern Uncertainty and Christian Faith* (1953) 25-36.

¹¹ CWR, 4.

¹² Idem, 5 and 53.

¹³ Idem, 5.

¹⁴ Idem, 54.

¹⁵ Idem, 5.

¹⁶ Idem, 12 and 53.

¹⁷ Idem, 12.

¹⁸ Idem, 240 (*italics in the original*).

¹⁹ Idem, 12.

²⁰ Idem, 112; cf. also p. 10 where Berkouwer speaks of a "fundamentally different sense of life".

begins to qualify this "central"²¹ or "focal point",²² this "central issue"²³ of the age-long conflict "as a struggle for the gospel of free sovereign grace".²⁴ In his view, what he reckons to be the historical starting-point of the Reformation is still the ultimate theological basis of the present-day division. All aspects of the battle with Roman Catholicism historically spring from this religious motive and are theologically intelligible in their inherent connection to it.

A twofold influence could be suggested to have contributed to shape Berkouwer's apologetical endeavour in this direction. On the one hand, his analysis of Roman Catholicism centred on the core issue seems to place itself in substantial continuity with his Dutch neo-Calvinistic tradition which, mainly through the works of Abraham Kuyper, developed a consistent approach to contemporary worldviews competing with Calvinism²⁵ in terms of the concept of "antithesis".²⁶ In this line of thought, the clashes between different worldviews were not explicable on the basis of sheer cultural, historical, or social dynamics; rather, their opposing presuppositional matrices were always and effectually operating in their outworking. Kuyper, Bavinck, and the neo-Calvinists in general constantly concentrated on the attempt to underline the "antithetical" thrust of Calvinism in relation to other secular or religious systems. Because Berkouwer is so profoundly linked with the same theological tradition, his conflictual approach to Catholicism should be apprehended as stemming from it.

On the other hand, the late Forties are the years in which Berkouwer aptly engages in the comprehensive study of Barth which he eventually finalises in 1954 with the publication of *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*. As mentioned earlier,²⁷ the book includes a chapter on Barth's sharp

²¹ Idem, 247.

²² Idem, 191.

²³ Idem, 76.

²⁴ Idem, 12.

²⁵ In his 1898 Stone Lectures on Calvinism, Kuyper mentions Paganism, Islamism, Romanism, and Modernism; cf. his *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931) and further discussions in 5.1.1.

²⁶ For a brief introduction to the concept of "antithesis" in Kuyper and Bavinck, cf. Begbie (1991) 93-95.

²⁷ p. 44; on Barth's critique of Roman Catholicism cf. also CWR, 228-232.

critique of Roman Catholicism as spelt out in the early volumes of the *Church Dogmatics*, and not surprisingly Berkouwer refers to it as his "antithesis" (!) to Rome. In fact, dealing with Barth's struggle with Rome is to come to terms with the "central and material purpose" of his theology²⁸ as well as with the "theological and confessional *framework*" of the Roman Church.²⁹ Further on, while expounding and assessing Barth's contention that the *analogia entis* is the "cardinal dogma"³⁰ of Roman Catholicism, Berkouwer argues that this fundamental doctrine, far from being an appendix in Barth's polemic, is instead the "*central point*" of his controversy with Rome.³¹ From whichever angle one might look at it, what is always at stake for Barth is this onto-theological postulate which saturates the whole of the Catholic dogmatic structure. On this point, the resemblance with Berkouwer's own approach is apparent.

The rest of CWR should then be seen as providing a detailed, albeit inevitably selective,³² account of some distinctive theological loci in which this profound presuppositional difference has found dogmatic articulation from the Reformation onwards.

Firstly, Berkouwer tackles the Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-understanding consisting, in his words, in "the fundamental idea of the living Christ within the church";³³ the characterization of the Church as "the continued incarnation of the heavenly Lord"³⁴ allows him to point to it as the "identity-view"³⁵ inasmuch as an "ontical identity"³⁶ between Christ and the Church is given an "*a priori* character"³⁷ guaranteeing her stability. Here the poignant dispute with the Reformation lies in the words "identity" versus "communion

²⁸ *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 168.

²⁹ Idem, 169 (italics in the original).

³⁰ Idem, 180; this is a quote from *Kirchliche Dogmatik* II/1 (1940) 275.

³¹ Idem, 180 (italics in the original).

³² CWR, 152.

³³ Idem, 20. This section on ecclesiology includes the chapters "Unshakable Authority?", 15-37; "The Church and Heresy", 38-51; and "The Guilt of the Church", 52-75.

³⁴ Idem, 23; this is actually a quotation from W. Grossouw, *In Christus, Schets van een theologie van St. Paulus* (1946) 95.

³⁵ Idem, 27.

³⁶ Idem, 28.

³⁷ Idem, 33 (italics in the original).

through the Word and the Spirit".³⁸ But this is just a provisional reduction of the contrast in that it is the ecclesiological side of the controversy which ultimately has to do with "sin and grace, *corruptio nature*, and the sovereign grace of God".³⁹

Subsequently, Berkouwer deals directly with "the conflict of grace"⁴⁰ in reference to the doctrine of justification by faith. Again, the issue is nothing less than "the grace of God",⁴¹ this time as it is related to freedom. In its soteriology, Roman Catholicism maintains the interpenetration of both elements, and according to Berkouwer, this composition constitutes "*the* problem of the Roman doctrine of grace"⁴² since it establishes a "complement-scheme"⁴³ between divine and human agencies in salvation; by making the reality of salvation "*dependent* on human activity", "in spite of all emphasis on divine grace",⁴⁴ the Catholic synthesis reveals "the irreligious nature of the Roman view of grace".⁴⁵

Mariology is the third doctrinal topic which Berkouwer articulates in some detail.⁴⁶ Here, from a Protestant perspective, the cardinal point might be considered "*the deification of a creature*"⁴⁷ but, instead, the issue is still God's grace as it is obfuscated by "the boundless overestimation of Mary".⁴⁸ In Catholic mariology, "grace is brought into equilibrium with the meritorious function of human life - notwithstanding all efforts to accentuate its sovereignty".⁴⁹ This is not merely a kind of mariological peculiarity within the

³⁸ Idem, 24.

³⁹ Idem, 73 (italics in the original).

⁴⁰ This is the title of Chapter IV of CWR, 76-112; the discussion goes on in Chapter V on "The Problem of the Assurance of Salvation", 113-151.

⁴¹ Idem, 76.

⁴² Idem, 86 (italics in the original).

⁴³ Idem, 89.

⁴⁴ Idem, 135 (italics in the original).

⁴⁵ Idem, 138.

⁴⁶ Idem, 152-178.

⁴⁷ Idem, 162 (italics in the original).

⁴⁸ Idem, 163.

⁴⁹ Idem, 166.

Catholic dogmatic system; on the contrary, for Berkouwer as for Barth,⁵⁰ at this point one is confronted with the essence of Roman Catholic dogma in its all-embracing synergistic element. In a passage worth quoting which is perhaps the climax of CWR, Berkouwer affirms that: "It is *this* equilibrium, *this* harmony that finds expression everywhere in Rome's doctrine: in natural theology and ethics, and in the rejection of the *sola fide* and the *sola gratia*, and of the Reformed doctrine of the depravity of human nature".⁵¹

Finally, the presentation of Berkouwer's profound uneasiness toward the Roman Catholic expanded interpretation of the Incarnation as the cosmological principle determining the *telos* of all reality⁵² does not add any new lines of argument to his straightforward controversy; it simply enhances the already emerged conviction that, even in the case of the dilation of the historical uniqueness of the Incarnation into a universal category of ontic transfiguration of the world, "*the discussion is about sin and grace*".⁵³

The nature of the dispute being of such fundamental importance, Berkouwer deems the gulf existing between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism to be beyond foreseeable recomposition. Theologically, the terms of the conflict could not be clearer, or at least it would appear so. The doctrine of grace seems to be at stake everywhere in Berkouwer's account. Nonetheless, this pivotal thesis, though continually repeated throughout the book, is hardly spelt out in a fully satisfactory systematic way. From the methodological point of view, accumulating repetitions of the same assertion, as he does, is not the equivalent of building a cumulative argument. In fairness, while constantly highlighting that grace is the heart of the matter, Berkouwer occasionally correlates it to the question of freedom, sin and salvation in such a way as to suggest some corollary ramifications of the problem. However enlightening they might be, these useful exemplifications do not exhaust the compelling task laid out before the dogmatician to present an integrated articulation of the core issue

⁵⁰ Cf. *The Triumph of Grace in the Theology of Karl Barth*, 175-176 where Berkouwer quotes Barth's *Kirchliche Dogmatik* I/2 (1938) 157.

⁵¹ CWR, 166 (italics in the original).

⁵² Idem, 191-211.

⁵³ Idem, 211 (italics in the original).

dividing Roman Catholicism and Protestantism. Certainly, while recognising the necessity of pursuing this pathway, Berkouwer stops at the threshold of it: in this respect, he has the clever intuition - inherited from his Dutch Neo-calvinistic tradition and confirmed by his studies on Barth - that methodological and theological reductionism in dealing with Roman Catholicism is a necessary requirement for Protestant scholarship; moreover, he singles out the doctrine of grace as the core problem of the division; on top of that, he indicates some unavoidable implications of the single issue on grace in various doctrinal areas; but unfortunately he does not construe a definitive dogmatic case capable of encompassing the multidimensionality of the conflict. Berkouwer points to it, engages in preliminary exercises towards it, yet fails to produce a comprehensive model of explanation completely freed from the limitations of being based on fragmentary insights.

2.1.2 The "New Theology" as the Most Significant Recent Development in Roman Catholic Thought

Berkouwer has always been an acute observer of the abrupt developments in contemporary theology, and his studies on Roman Catholicism were also subject to constant revision and reformulation in the light of an ever alerted theological research. He was too well aware that even the Roman rigid appeal to a *de iure* unchangeability ratified in 1870 at the First Vatican Council was not *de facto* incompatible with the partial assimilation of the dynamics of history flowing outside and within the Church. On the other hand, his main concern was not to be dominated by a "barren anti-papism"⁵⁴ but by the continuous need to hear afresh the claims of the gospel in their power to challenge the Church and the theologians.⁵⁵ This attentive attitude prompted Berkouwer to explore sketchily in *Recent Developments in Roman Catholic Thought* (1958) the main directions of the process in nuce which the theological fabric of Catholic doctrine and practice was undergoing at the turn of mid-Twentieth century.

Various signals of change unequivocally bore witness to this gradual but

⁵⁴ RDRCT, 9.

inexorable shift, not yet apparent in the official *magisterium* but manifest indeed in some leading mainstream theologians of the Church. In this respect, Berkouwer mentions the new appraisal of Luther in Catholic historiography, especially as promoted in the works by Yves Congar, Karl Adam, and Joseph Lortz.⁵⁶ A new image of Luther had fostered also a new interpretation of the Reformation which was beginning to be seen as "a revolution within the church",⁵⁷ a historico-theological judgement of massive importance for Catholic scholars to pronounce and utterly unimaginable only few years before the Fifties. In line with this conciliatory approach, Hans Küng's comparative work on justification was trying to argue that there was no difference in principle between the doctrine of justification as expounded by Trent and that of Karl Barth.⁵⁸

Another significant pointer of the same trend was the so-called New Theology movement as championed by continental theologians like Henri Bouillard, Henri de Lubac, Jean Danielou, and Hans Urs von Balthasar;⁵⁹ in its open concern for the evolution of dogma, its unprecedented emphasis on the relativity and the limitation of human knowledge, and its renewed interest in Biblical theology, the movement was opening new promising pathways of research for Roman Catholic theology which Protestant theologians could also recognise as being of common interest.

However, in the midst of all these positive indications foreshadowed by the *Nouvelle Théologie*, Berkouwer could not overlook the fact that in 1950 Pius XII had issued the encyclical *Humani Generis* with the primary threefold objective to warn Roman Catholic theologians against an ^{EIRENIC} imprudence towards non-Catholics, an uncritical sympathy for existentialist trends of thought at the expense of thomistic ecclesiastical philosophy, and the danger of an implied relativistic undermining of the authority of the Church hidden in

⁵⁵ Idem, 10 and 67. Berkouwer calls this attitude "the power of the Reformation", 65-75.

⁵⁶ Idem, 26-32; cf. also SVCNC, 36-40.

⁵⁷ Idem, 30.

⁵⁸ Idem, 55-64.

⁵⁹ Idem, 33-43.

many attempts to stress the evolution of dogma.⁶⁰ The Pope was still deeply reluctant to allow any alien, and in his judgement, modernist infiltration to creep in in order to safeguard the traditional Catholic self-understanding of the Church; however, the absolute novelty of this phase was that various significant streams of change were already finding their way within high Catholic theological circles through the work of some wholeheartedly committed Roman Catholic theologians. The process was slow but relentless, and most importantly, well settled inside the Roman Catholic Church.

As singled out in the previous section on CWR, Berkouwer speaks of the doctrine of grace as being *the* burning issue between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism; interestingly enough, in RDRCT Berkouwer refrains from referring to it, nor does he show a similar willingness to pursue his critical endeavour according to the at times polemical, yet crystal clear track of CWR. Reading between the lines, a sort of parallelism is somehow traceable between the developments in Roman Catholic thought which Berkouwer is depicting, and the developments in his own approach on Roman Catholicism. Both are moving towards something different from what they have been so far, and RDRCT is undoubtedly a product of this transient period.

2.1.3 The Second Vatican Council and the affirmation of the New Catholicism

Looking at Berkouwer's works on Roman Catholicism in retrospective, the impression that can be gathered is that there is a much closer link between RDRCT and SVCNC than between CWR and RDRCT in terms of methodology of inquiry and of overall theological thrust.

According to Berkouwer, what used to be ascertained as being the recent developments in Roman Catholic thought have now given origin to the New Catholicism; the penetration process of ideas, concerns, and ethos spurred by the New Theology had come to fruition by rooting itself into the highest spheres of the Vatican as well as into the wider life of the Church. The Second Vatican Council could then be thought of as having been the official recognition and

⁶⁰ Idem, 44-54; on the same encyclical, cf. SVCNC, 71-74 and 119-124.

acceptance by the Church of the new agenda. The situation is so dramatically "changed"⁶¹ that, without being acquainted with the New Theology, it is utterly impossible to come to grips with the whole of the contemporary Roman Catholic scene⁶² after the "unexpected"⁶³ convocation of the Vatican II. Against this background, Berkouwer attempts to sample the bearing of the New Theology upon the preliminary moves of the Council by showing the direct or indirect influence of its most representative theologians on the Council's works.⁶⁴

The astonishing phrases "open Catholicism" or "new breadth" recurring in Roman Catholic publications and debates in the Sixties;⁶⁵ the contagious spreading of "a spirit of anti-triumphalism" within laity and ecclesiastical hierarchy alike;⁶⁶ the sincere openness to question and to revise the centuries old sedimented historico-theological negative evaluation of the Reformation;⁶⁷ the frank admission of the obligation for the Church to recognise her guilt and to repent as an important condition for Church unity;⁶⁸ these, amongst others, are all qualified signals of what Berkouwer describes as "the new interpretative phase" which marks, not without provoking inner tensions,⁶⁹ contemporary Roman Catholicism.⁷⁰ Granted that this movement should not be considered a revived form of modernism nor a masked version of revisionism,⁷¹ Berkouwer

⁶¹ Berkouwer entitles a chapter of SVCNC "The Changed Climate", 34-56; cf. also p. 174.

⁶² Idem, 7.

⁶³ Cf. the chapter "The Unexpected Council", 11-33.

⁶⁴ Apart from the already mentioned theologians of the *Nouvelle Théologie*, Berkouwer interacts at length with Karl Rahner.

⁶⁵ Idem, 34.

⁶⁶ Idem, 36, 183-185, and 216.

⁶⁷ Idem, 41-45.

⁶⁸ Idem, 50-51.

⁶⁹ Cf., for example, the divisions between "minimalists" and "maximalists" in mariology, 221-248, or between "progressives" and "conservatives", 255-256.

⁷⁰ Idem, 53; the same expression "interpretative phase" to synthesise the Catholic main trend is employed by Berkouwer in his *Christianity Today's* article "Protestant-Catholic Dialogue: A Reformed View" (1964), 7. In *A Half Century of Theology* (1977), Berkouwer speaks of the "challenge" of finding "a *hermeneutic* for reinterpreting the affirmations of the church", 220 (italics in the original).

⁷¹ SVCNC, 56.

analyses the actual outworking of this new Catholic trend in some key areas of the Roman doctrinal system.

The thorny question of unchangeability and changeability of dogma is one of the domains of interest expounded in SVCNC.⁷² While the New Theology underlines the historical conditionedness of the Church's reception of God's revelation as formulated in her dogmatic statements, it also maintains the *a priori* vision of the Church as endowed with the charism of infallibility. The New Theology is thus concerned with "the *a priori certain* unchangeability *within* all the variations of history".⁷³ The *semper eadem* is no more seen in isolation but correlated in Roman Catholic fashion to the ever changing *tempora*. According to Berkouwer, this position which reckons with "the temporal conditionedness of human speech"⁷⁴ without being sucked into dogmatic relativism, opens a breach for further ecumenical effort⁷⁵ inasmuch as it testifies to a not irrelevant shift in the Roman Catholic apprehension of the Church if compared, for instance, with the still self-glorifying tone of the encyclical *Mystici Corporis Christi* of 1943.⁷⁶

Ecclesiologically, the dogmatic emphasis is now on the the dynamics of the pilgrim Church in which the eschatological congregation of the people of God is gathered. Added to that, the narrow interpretation of the Cyprianic dictum *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* is subject to radical revision⁷⁷ in terms of breaking the bare identification between the mystical body of Christ and the Roman Catholic Church, and allowing the bold recognition of "the existence of other *churches* outside of Rome",⁷⁸ or of *vestigia ecclesiae* in other Christian communities.⁷⁹ The traditional attributes of the Church (i.e. unity, holiness, catholicity, and apostolicity) are not conceived simply as the description of

⁷² Idem, 57-88.

⁷³ Idem, 81 (italics in the original).

⁷⁴ Idem, 82.

⁷⁵ Ibidem.

⁷⁶ On this encyclical, cf. idem, 178-181; 189; 198-200.

⁷⁷ Idem, 188-196.

⁷⁸ Idem, 200 (italics in the original).

⁷⁹ Idem, 203. Berkouwer argues that the *vestigia* concept leaves the real ecclesiological problem "untouched" because it implies the Catholic doctrine of the *unica ecclesia*.

"what the Church *per se* is, but what the Church is *summoned to become*";⁸⁰ the mystery of the Church is therefore "both gift and responsibility".⁸¹ In the New Theology a tension between the *already* and the *not yet*⁸² is inserted in what used to be a rather static perception of the Church's prerogatives.⁸³

How this considerable turning is theologically consistent with respect to the traditional Roman Catholic "identity-view" is highly problematic from a Protestant standpoint;⁸⁴ but this is exactly what the thrust of the "new interpretative phase" is all about, and Berkouwer fully acknowledges the sincerity and the honesty of the New Catholicism in this enormous hermeneutical task. He is convinced that Roman Catholic theology has inner cognitive and motivational resources to accommodate the tensions fostered by the New Theology without disowning the guaranteed indefectibility of the Church, and that the New Theology is so intrinsically Catholic not to present any serious challenge to her claimed stability. However, according to Berkouwer, the indubitable change of attitude has to be appreciated because it encourages "a fairly new and important point of contact for ecumenical dialogue".⁸⁵

Another interesting section of the book is where Berkouwer surveys the emerging developments as far as the connection between Scripture and tradition is concerned.⁸⁶ The "new accent on Scripture"⁸⁷ is a qualifying feature of the New Theology which has engaged itself in the courageous enterprise, undertaken particularly by R.J. Geiselman, of arguing that the "double-source theory" of revelation generally attributed to the Council of Trent is instead a faulty misreading of its proceedings.⁸⁸ In line with this re-reading, Trent is thought to have granted room for the subsequent doctrinal recognition of the sufficiency of Scripture while, at the same time, according to the living tradition

⁸⁰ Idem, 213 (italics in the original).

⁸¹ Idem, 214.

⁸² It is worth noticing that Berkouwer does not employ this expression.

⁸³ Idem, 214-215.

⁸⁴ Idem, 186-188; 196-197; 202-206; 214-215.

⁸⁵ Idem, 216.

⁸⁶ Idem, 89-111.

⁸⁷ Idem, 97 and 107.

of the Church the infallible interpretative function. If that is the case, Berkouwer asks whether there is a concrete possibility to expect a "Catholic version of *Sola Scriptura*".⁸⁹ More realistically, this reopened debate constitutes "a new meeting ground for discussion",⁹⁰ though the question of the nature of the assistance given to the Church by the Holy Spirit in her understanding of Scripture and in her teaching authority remains a matter of on-going controversy between Roman Catholics and Protestants.⁹¹

This leads exactly to the heart of Berkouwer's argument concerning the theological nature of the persistent division between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism even in the light of these new significant changes, and SVCNC marks a considerable shift of perspective in Berkouwer's critique. If CWR was primarily focused on the doctrine of grace as being the bottom line distinction, SVCNC instead glimpses it in the doctrine of the Church, particularly as related to the automatic certainty of the presence of the Holy Spirit in the Church,⁹² or to "the *nature of the guarantee* given to the Church that it will prevail to the end of time".⁹³ In CWR the ecclesiological problem was just an instance, amongst others, of the deeper fundamental issue regarding grace, whereas in SVCNC it not only stands theologically on its own but also it has come to the fore as the prominent question whereas grace is apparently silenced. While Berkouwer sometimes employs, albeit less consistently, the same expressions centred on basic motives (e.g. when referring to "the *central question*",⁹⁴ "the most important issue"⁹⁵), his overall apprehension of the conflict has varied and his privileged standpoint of evaluation replaced. The realisation that the Church would have been "the central theme"⁹⁶ of the Council

⁸⁸ Idem, 93-99.

⁸⁹ Idem, 98. Berkouwer thinks that this is the case in Rahner and Küng: idem, 99.

⁹⁰ Idem, 108.

⁹¹ Idem, 110-111 and 141-145.

⁹² Berkouwer defines it "the ecclesiastical-pneumatological issue", 110.

⁹³ Idem, 177.

⁹⁴ Idem, 111 (*italics in the original*).

⁹⁵ Idem, 177.

⁹⁶ Idem, 231. Since SVCNC was published before the end of the Vatican II and Berkouwer could not include in these sections any reference to the two main

was for Berkouwer a motive for ardent expectation but also the opportunity better to grasp the core problem still separating the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions.

In this respect, Berkouwer suggests that the ecumenical agenda should not have been animated by sheer pessimism or unwarranted optimism,⁹⁷ but by the demanding pursuit of a "realistic ecumenicity"⁹⁸ shaped by a strictly combined "love for truth *and unity*" and "love for unity *and truth*".⁹⁹

2.1.4 Conclusion

From the proposed diachronic outline, it emerges that Berkouwer's appraisal of Roman Catholicism has gone through a process of refinement in correspondence with the modified religious climate occurring at the turn of mid-Twentieth century, and ratified on the Roman Catholic side by the Vatican II. More discontinuities than continuities are recognizable throughout, especially as far as the perception of the nature of the theological difference between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism is concerned. Shifting the pivotal criterion from the doctrine of grace to that of the Church is a dogmatic move which is in itself of much greater importance than softening the rather confrontational approach into a more dialogical disposition. The displacement of the doctrine of grace from its central position does weaken the critical thrust of an Evangelical theological perspective on Catholicism by practically bypassing the Reformation roots of the conflict; and this is perhaps what the New Catholicism would have aimed at. However, Berkouwer's studies on Roman Catholicism enrich Evangelical theology in terms of providing a model of serious scholarship, fair interpretation of Roman Catholic sources, and passionate concern for the

ecclesiological documents of the Council, namely *Lumen Gentium* and *Gaudium et Spes*, which powerfully mirror the challenging concerns put forward by the New Theology. *Lumen Gentium* was approved by the Council during the Third Session on 19 November 1964: Hastings (1991) 87; while *Gaudium et Spes* was approved during the Fourth Session on 6 December 1965: Hastings (1991) 47. SVCNC's Dutch edition was instead published in 1964 prior to the two documents.

⁹⁷ Idem, 248.

⁹⁸ Idem, 250.

⁹⁹ Ibidem (*italics in the original*).

Gospel's sake.

2.2 CORNELIUS VAN TIL

Any serious survey of contemporary Evangelical approaches to Roman Catholicism cannot be dispensed from dealing at some length with the extensive work of Cornelius Van Til.¹⁰⁰ In the firmament of Evangelical theology in our century, his contribution especially but not exclusively in the neglected field of apologetics has been distinct and fertile, even in raising a number of deep controversies and on-going debates within Evangelicalism at large.¹⁰¹

With his "radical", "integral" and "trascendental" apologetics,¹⁰² this champion of what has been referred to as the presuppositional school of apologetics¹⁰³ has been also defined, not without a hint of hyperbolic historical judgement, "perhaps the most important Christian thinker since John Calvin",¹⁰⁴ or much more realistically, "one of the greatest apologists of our time".¹⁰⁵ Certainly, even without indulging in improbable historical comparisons, his apologetics aiming at the vindication of the Christian truth and based on the Creator-creature distinction coupled with the necessity of presupposing God's revelation in all human thought calls for careful study and consideration. Unfortunately, with few brilliant exceptions like Frame's studies on Van Til, up to now those who have written on him have been either uncritically sympathetic or overcritically debunkers of his thought. Instead, Van Til would deserve

¹⁰⁰ For an exhaustive and annotated bibliography of and on Van Til, see Frame (1995) 445-452. Cf. also Geehan (1971) 492-498.

¹⁰¹ Critical voices on Van Til are, for instance, Sproul-Gerstner-Lindsley (1984) and McGrath (1992).

¹⁰² According to Edgar (1995), these adjectives qualify Van Til's apologetics. "Radical" because of its refusal of epistemological neutrality, "integral" because involving a worldview, "trascendental" because evoking the importance of presuppositions.

¹⁰³ Exponents of this school are chiefly his successors at Westminster: John Frame, William Edgar, Scott Oliphint. However, Van Til's influence is wide in Evangelical circles, cf. Frame (1995) 389-396. Apart from his masterful analysis of Van Til's thought, Frame has also written a textbook on apologetics reflecting the vantillian perspective: Frame (1994).

¹⁰⁴ Frame (1993) 162.

attentive interpreters and fair critics who would engage in the task of increasing the plausibility of what has already been said on him. His assessment of Roman Catholicism confirms the general impression that, no matter how many discussions and perplexities his positions could have stirred up and still do, Van Til is nonetheless an unavoidable thought-provoking reference figure for today's Evangelical theology.¹⁰⁶

Strictly speaking, Van Til's expertise and disciplinary area is apologetics which he taught at Westminster Theological Seminary from 1927 to 1971. His written works too can be subsumed under the specific domain of apologetics, though his achievements have an important bearing for the whole of theological reflection.¹⁰⁷

Drawing and further elaborating his categories of thought from the same Dutch neo-calvinistic tradition as Berkouwer did,¹⁰⁸ Van Til reasons his apologetical discourse in systemic terms, that is assuming that each Christian tradition implies a *Weltanschauung* forging all areas of life. According to this conviction then, all different systems of thought are nothing but coherent expressions of a more or less integrated worldview stemming from a religious pre-theoretical core.¹⁰⁹

Along with this affinity with the neo-calvinist school, Van Til also employs the Kuyperian concept of "antithesis" as it was reinforced by Gresham Machen in attacking modern theological Liberalism at the turn of this century.¹¹⁰ This apologetical category is pervasively present in his theological critique and forms the backbone of much of his polemic endeavour.¹¹¹ That means that in

¹⁰⁵ Edgar (1991) 3.

¹⁰⁶ For preliminary assessments of Van Til, see Rushdoony (1958), Probst (1977), Roberts (1985), Oliphint (1990), Frame (1993), Edgar (1995). For more thorough analyses, see Frame (1995) and Bahnsen (1998). For interesting attempts to build on his thought in different disciplinary areas, cf. North (1976).

¹⁰⁷ Van Til's importance for theology is explored by Frame (1976). Cf. also Frame (1987).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. the section of this research on Berkouwer, 45.

¹⁰⁹ It is perhaps interesting to notice that Eastern Orthodoxy is not considered in Van Til's writings.

¹¹⁰ See Machen's *Christianity and Liberalism* (1923).

¹¹¹ On the treatment of antithesis in Van Til, cf. Frame (1995) 187-213. On Kuyper's and Machen's influences on him, cf. *idem*, 19-44.

Van Til's perception, all variety of Christian theisms, not to speak of all non-Christian configurations of thought, stand in antithetical relation with Reformed orthodoxy in that the opposition between them is traceable in their ultimate reference points which, in turn, shape their respective ontologies, epistemologies and ethics. In his long career, Van Til has explored this fundamental contrast with particular reference to Karl Barth and neo-orthodoxy which he poignantly defines "new modernism".¹¹²

More generally, beside arguing positively the tenets of his presuppositional Reformed view, Van Til often tests them against some forms of Christian thought in his eyes compromised by their adoption of non-Christian ideas in order to show their substantial incompatibility despite their "formal" occasional agreements with the Reformed orthodox persuasion. In this respect, he often discusses Roman Catholicism, Arminianism¹¹³ and less consistent Reformed options.¹¹⁴

Thus, his interests in Roman Catholicism have to be understood as part of the attempt to provide a consistently Reformed apologetical theory which he pursues by way of confronting and contrasting the Catholic approach with his Reformed one. Of course, this comparative procedure is also finalised to indicate the fundamental flaws and consequential weaknesses of what Van Til deems to be a rival apologetical system and, even more than that, a wholly alternative worldview.

¹¹² In *The New Modernism* (1946; hereafter NM) and *Christianity and Barthianism* (1962; hereafter CB).

¹¹³ In Van Til's vocabulary, arminianism is often a synonymous of Evangelicalism, cf., for example, *The Defense of the Faith* (1955; hereafter DF) 78-79, 139-146 or *A Christian Theory of Knowledge* (1969; hereafter CTK) 209-220.

¹¹⁴ Usually identified in the Old Princeton theologians (e.g. C. Hodge and B.B. Warfield) who, according to Van Til, have not fully developed their apologetics from their epistemic premises, thus falling into more evidentialist positions. Cf. DF, 79-90 or *Christian Apologetics* (1976; hereafter CA) 47-51.

2.2.1 Van Til's Historico-Theological Distinction in his Understanding of Roman Catholicism

After having pointed to the general context in which Van Til construes his studies on Roman Catholicism, it is necessary to deepen these preliminary remarks by suggesting what appear to be the primary interpretative categories which direct his analytical effort. Being an alert and critical witness of the significant developments which had occurred within Roman Catholic theology from the Fifties onwards till their culmination at the Second Vatican Council, Van Til is aware of the impossibility of referring to Roman Catholicism as a theologically monolithic reality, especially from a post-Vatican II vantage point. His increasing interaction with leading figures of the theological scene which was going through the combined process of *ressourcement* and *aggiornamento* has convinced him that Roman Catholicism, though maintaining institutional unity and structural cohesion, is at least a twofold reality as far as theological orientations are concerned. In it, two religious outlooks creatively coexist if not organically coalesce.

On the one hand, there is the "traditional" Roman Catholicism with its well established thomistic legacy construed along the centuries of Catholic history.¹¹⁵ On the other, "modern" Catholicism is gradually but relentlessly absorbing categories of thought and cultural sensibility derived from contemporary secular intellectual trends.¹¹⁶

Van Til deals specifically with both typologies of Roman Catholicism, or with exponents of both sides even though not always with the same degree of thoroughness: Aquinas and thomism in general,¹¹⁷ Trent,¹¹⁸ Vatican I¹¹⁹ as part of traditional Catholicism, Von Balthasar,¹²⁰ Küng,¹²¹ Lonergan,¹²² Teilhard de

¹¹⁵ Cf. *The Reformed Pastor and Modern Thought* (1971, hereafter RPMT) 73-105.

¹¹⁶ Idem, 189-224.

¹¹⁷ Throughout the vantillian *opus*.

¹¹⁸ e.g. *The Doctrine of Scripture* (1967) 34; CTK, 156-157.

¹¹⁹ e.g. CTK, 156-161.

¹²⁰ e.g. CB, 319-357.

¹²¹ e.g. Idem, 358-386.

¹²² e.g. the 43-page unpublished paper on Lonergan (1973).

Chardin,¹²³ just to name a few, and, of course, Vatican II¹²⁴ as key-theologians and qualifying events of modern Catholicism.

This basic differentiation which entails both continuities and discontinuities between the two versions of Roman Catholicism plays an important role in Van Til's chief criticism of the Roman framework of thought, that is the "synthesis" thesis.

2.2.2 Van Til's Systemic Evaluation of Roman Catholicism

In Van Til's apologetical discourse, matters of historical, philosophical or theological detail are never granted strategic intellectual significance nor are they given any in-depth treatment. Rather, Van Til's epistemic agenda keeps on focussing on and hammering out on the level of presuppositional matrixes. In Frame's words, "Van Til typically thinks in terms of systems"¹²⁵ whereby starting points, methods and conclusions are all involved in one another. In this attention on frameworks of thought as systems - which he perhaps inherited from the tradition of philosophical idealism which he encountered in his university formation¹²⁶ - lies his major concerns in assessing different and competing worldviews.

Having said that, it is of paramount importance to delineate Van Til's basic picture of Roman Catholicism which is at work in his attempt to provide an overall critique from a Reformed standpoint. In approaching Roman Catholicism, Van Til makes extended use of a rich set of interpretative categories pointing all to its fundamental nature. In rapid succession, Roman Catholicism is denoted as being a "synthesis",¹²⁷ a "compromise",¹²⁸ a

¹²³ e.g. "Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. Evolution and Christ" (1966).

¹²⁴ e.g. CTK, 175-193 and *Doctrine of Scripture*, 1-2.

¹²⁵ Frame (1995) 341.

¹²⁶ Cf. Frame (1995) 21, 266.

¹²⁷ e.g. CTK, 175, 188, 192; CB, 377, 380; RPMT, 84, 192; CB, 230. It is worth adding that Herman Dooyeweerd, a scholar in some respects near to Van Til, speaks of Catholicism as "the great synthesis" between Biblical and Greek motives. Cf. Dooyeweerd (1979) 111-147.

¹²⁸ e.g. CA, 89; DF, 3 and 136, 139; CTK, 13.

"combination",¹²⁹ a "fusion",¹³⁰ a "confusion",¹³¹ a supplementation,¹³² an addition,¹³³ a correlation,¹³⁴ a "midway",¹³⁵ a "half way",¹³⁶ or again an "alliance"¹³⁷ between Christian and non-Christian elements. These descriptive suggestions of Roman Catholicism are many though their critical thrust is substantially the same.

To illustrate vividly the point through the aid of a metaphor derived from the builder's language, Van Til argues that "Romanists mix a great deal of the clay of paganism with the iron of Christianity".¹³⁸ The result is a religious framework in which a variety of dishomogeneous presuppositional features merge ^{So} as to form a newly constructed configuration of thought where they find theological citizenship. In any case, the thesis that Roman Catholicism has a composite and manifold essence is strongly underlined.

Shifting the focus from categories to contents of Van Til's analysis, Roman Catholicism is for him the historical outcome of a process of assimilation by what used to be an authentic Christian worldview of mainly Aristotelian thought-products which have lead to a radical transformation of the former. Actually, Roman Catholicism is strictly speaking "a *deformation* of Christianity"¹³⁹ itself whereby alien presuppositions and pagan connotations (i.e. the form-matter scheme) are given a christianized status and concur to shape the whole system. In arithmetical terms, Roman Catholicism is "a synthesis of

¹²⁹ e.g. CTK 168, 188; RPMT 219; *The Case for Calvinism* (1964, hereafter CC) 58.

¹³⁰ e.g. CTK, 188.

¹³¹ e.g. CA, 41; DF, 71-72; CTK, 168.

¹³² e.g. CTK, 173.

¹³³ e.g. DF, 3, 73.

¹³⁴ e.g. CTK, 168; DF, 156; CB, 325; RPMT, 93; CC, 57.

¹³⁵ e.g. RPMT, 94.

¹³⁶ e.g. DF, 56.

¹³⁷ e.g. CB, 229; *The Intellectual Challenge of the Gospel* (1953) 11.

¹³⁸ DF, 221. Van Til goes on by writing: "the concrete blocks may be those of Christianity, but the cement is nothing other than the sand of paganism" (*ibidem*).

¹³⁹ CA, 41; DF, 71 (*italics in the original*).

Aristotle plus Christ".¹⁴⁰ Thus, the Catholic Christ is better identifiable with the appellation "Aristotle-Christ".¹⁴¹

In fairness to him, Van Til maintains that "Romanism has in it a large element of true Christianity". The problem is that this healthy part is nonetheless "counterbalanced and modified by so much taken from non-Christian philosophy".¹⁴² Historically, the key-figure of this gentle albeit tragic invasion of Aristotelianism into Christianity is Thomas Aquinas whereas the larger movement which has eventually promoted an unstable compromise between Christian theism and Greek philosophy is Catholic Scholasticism.¹⁴³

What has been said so far pertains of course to what Van Til calls "traditional Catholicism". Earlier in the section, though, an incidental reference was made to the historico-theological distinction which Van Til was prone to establish between "traditional" and "modern Catholicism". In this respect, it is interesting to notice that Van Til does not change his interpretative categories in his perception of pre- as well as post-Vatican II developments within the Roman Catholic scene. As "synthesis" was an appropriate way to single out the basic nature of scholastic or tridentine Catholicism, so it continues validly to portray its modern version. The difference between the two lies in the scheme of thought and its main philosophical advocate which acquire prominence in the process of synthesis. In modern Catholicism, the form-matter motif of Aristotelian derivation is superseded by the freedom-nature one championed by Kant. Thus, the contemporary Catholic Christ has inevitably become "the Kant-Christ synthesis".¹⁴⁴ In all its philosophical newness and with the modified implications for the Roman Catholic worldview, the change has a distinguishable rationale behind it in that, according to Van Til, one "cannot start with Aristotle without eventually falling prey to Kant".¹⁴⁵ In this rather

¹⁴⁰ CTK, 175.

¹⁴¹ CTK, 185.

¹⁴² CTK, 168.

¹⁴³ e.g. RPMT, 83-104. Frame devotes two useful chapters on Van Til's treatment of both Aquinas and Scholasticism, Frame (1995) 257-268 and 339-352.

¹⁴⁴ CTK, 185, 192.

¹⁴⁵ DF, 135.

deterministic view, Van Til seems to be saying that once the Christian system has been affected by the infiltration of pagan elements it is forcedly subject to be always directed by the fundamental orientations imposed by the shifting trends of secular thought.

However, the synthesis^{WHICH} emerged with the rising of modernity does not replace completely the medieval one^{SO} as to erase several centuries of Roman Catholic history and ecclesiastical tradition. This mere substitution would not fit the Catholic way of relating to historical and cultural processes whereby discontinuity always occurs in the presence of some kind of continuity. For Van Til, the simple "Kant-Christ synthesis" would rather envisage "modern Protestantism", Barth and neo-orthodoxy included, in which the Christ-event is read through the Kantian lens.¹⁴⁶ In modern Catholicism, instead, the interactive dynamics involves a further synthesis leading to a tripolar result which is obtained by means of an enlargement of the Catholic epistemic ability to a relatively new element mediated through modern Protestantism. In Van Til's way of putting it, "the former Aristotle-Christ synthesis and the former Kant-Christ synthesis have joined hands to form the Aristotle-Kant-Christ synthesis".¹⁴⁷ Having these combined intellectual coordinates, modern Catholicism is therefore thought of being "a synthesis of medieval essentialism and modern existentialism".¹⁴⁸

The category of synthesis and related denotations has a leading function in Van Til's evaluation of Roman Catholicism in systemic terms. The concentration on this interpretative category is not an end in itself as if Van Til would indulge in producing a series of redundant generic statements and using a slogan-type of language devoid of any theological substance. On the contrary, his insistence on this kind of categorial analysis is accompanied by and sustained with the exploration of several themes stemming from his basic thesis. These apologetical exercises can be considered as many sketched case-studies in

¹⁴⁶ This is the main critical thrust of NM and CB.

¹⁴⁷ CTK, 185. Later in the same book, Van Til writes: "the (Catholic) church has enlarged the vision of herself and of her mission by means of adding the Kant-Christ synthesis with which neo-orthodox Protestantism operates to its own Aristotle-Christ synthesis", 192.

Roman Catholic worldview in general and in Catholic theology in particular. The Roman Catholic synthesis is traceable in Catholic ontology, anthropology, epistemology, ethics, and apologetical strategy, just to mention a few specific domains in which Van Til tests his critical approach. Beyond these specific cases, Van Til is consistently aware that from a systemic point of view the research on the Catholic synthesis could have been conducted on "every point of doctrine"¹⁴⁹ or "along the entire gamut of doctrinal expression"¹⁵⁰ without dispersing its focus into matters of fragmentary details.

2.2.2.1 The nature-grace motif¹⁵¹

Van Til thinks that the traditional Roman Catholic nature-grace scheme is an attempt to fit the god of Aristotle in its relationship to the world of space and time as it is conceived by the philosopher to the God of Christianity and the creation He has made. The pure form standing in "relation of correlativity to a self-existing mass of non-rational matter"¹⁵² is adjusted to the God who in Christ freely gives his grace to the world. In this respect, Thomas has imposed "the Christian worldview on top of Aristotle's scheme of abstract form and chaotic matter".¹⁵³ The two realms -nature and grace - are thought one in Aristotelian way, the other in Christian terms, and therefore respond to two all-together different sets of presuppositional criteria. As to their relationship, they are juxtaposed one to the other in order to retain "both the "freedom" of man and the sovereignty of God as well as a "rational relation" between the two".¹⁵⁴ At most, grace brings an elevation *supra naturam* but it does not shape it totally. Nature maintains a given dimension of independent life. For Van Til, the fact that the sphere of nature, even if to a limited extent, enjoys a certain degree of

¹⁴⁸ CTK, 193.

¹⁴⁹ DF, 71.

¹⁵⁰ CA, 41.

¹⁵¹ In CC, 57 Van Til refers to "the natural-supernatural theology of Roman Catholicism". For a critique of contemporary Protestant thought's understanding of Aquinas' nature and grace relationship Van Til included), cf. Vos (1985) 123-160.

¹⁵² CC, 57.

¹⁵³ Frame (1995) 267.

¹⁵⁴ CC, 57.

autonomy from the Creator God is totally unacceptable because it would compromise the doctrine of the absolute sovereignty of God who instead, as Van Til repeatedly affirms, controls whatsoever come to pass.

Van Til is also conscious that modern Catholicism has somehow modified the nature-grace scheme inherited from Scholasticism and that the extrinsic version of that relationship does not apply any longer to authors like Von Balthasar and Küng. These new theologians operate with more "dynamic categories"¹⁵⁵ within the context of a more open system tending towards Barthian "dialecticism".¹⁵⁶ Unfortunately, Van Til does not sample in detail the new Roman Catholic understanding of the nature-grace motif though he would probably locate it as a Catholically overtone appendix of Barth's treatment of the issue.

2.2.2.2 Anthropological Emphases

The dependence of traditional Roman Catholicism from Aristotle's views is also attested in the field of anthropology. According to Van Til, man as it is understood in Roman Catholicism needs God's superadded grace more because of his finitude than because of his sin. The ethical rebellion of the fall is given a minor importance than man's constitutive status in tracing the existential disturbance in human nature. This conviction points to the similarity between Rome and Aristotle on this issue too. They both share the view that "man is made up, in part, of non-rational elements"¹⁵⁷ which are not due primarily to any fault of his own. Elsewhere, Van Til writes that according to the axis Aristotle-Aquinas, man "participates in non-being as well as in being".¹⁵⁸ In relation to sin, "fallen man is therefore only partly guilty and only partly to blame"¹⁵⁹ contrary to the Reformed doctrine of man's total depravity and full inexcusability. If that is the case, Van Til then envisages a defective doctrine of

¹⁵⁵ Cf. CB, 357 and 376-378.

¹⁵⁶ Cf. CB, 324-325, 329-331, 348-350, 378-386.

¹⁵⁷ CA, 43.

¹⁵⁸ CTK, 160.

¹⁵⁹ DF, 57.

sin impinging on the whole Roman Catholic anthropology whose connotation is a biblically unwarranted optimism.

2.2.2.3 The Final Point of Predication

A certain degree of autonomy granted to the realm of nature has also heavy epistemological implications attached to it. Van Til argues that if man is considered as an autonomous being in some respects he, and not God, will become the ultimate reference point of predication. Intelligibility of the world and its comprehension will be possible without reference to God. In this scenario, the decisive presupposition for all knowledge and life will not be God's revelation in Christ through the Scriptures but human would-be autonomous reason, consciousness or experience.

Again, for Van Til the traditional Roman Catholic position on epistemological authority does not accept deliberately this radical, secular assumption. However, it does tragically compromise the Christian and the non-Christian views on the matter which, for Van Til, are nothing but "mutually opposed systems".¹⁶⁰

2.2.2.4 Ethical Ability

From the vantillian systemic perspective, what is true in the field of knowledge is no less true in the field of ethics.¹⁶¹ Epistemological autonomy necessarily involves ethical autonomy. In Roman Catholic theology, at least as it is apprehended by Van Til, man, even fallen man, retains ethical ability as it were an irrevocable heritage of his metaphysical make-up. In this respect, the Scholastic cardinal virtues are something comprehensible to human intellect and practicable to human volition even a part from divine grace. In his rather deductive reasoning, Van Til concludes that in a Roman Catholic framework of thought "even the regenerate consciousness need not and cannot subject itself

¹⁶⁰ Cf. CTK, 13 and 168.

¹⁶¹ Cf. DF, 56.

fully to Scripture".¹⁶² Roman Catholics grant the Bible only partial necessity, formal authority, opacified perspicuity and practical insufficiency.¹⁶³

2.2.2.5 The Issue Concerning the Point of Contact

In the wide range of apologetical topics touched by Van Til in his numerous writings, one of his most debated matters regards the presumptive point of contact between the believer and the unbeliever. With his concept of "antithesis" Van Til tends to deny the possibility of establishing a preliminary common, neutral ground between the two counterparts in their interaction on spiritual matters.¹⁶⁴ Contrary to the vantillian Reformed persuasion, as Roman Catholicism accords so much ground to the natural man because of its Aristotelian background, it is consequentially bound to leave unchallenged the unregenerate's presuppositions in the course of the dialogue. Thus, Roman Catholicism presents Christianity "as something that is merely information additional"¹⁶⁵ to what one already possesses without radically questioning his fundamental assumptions which are expression of man's entrenched allegiance away from God as a covenant-breaker. The Catholic recognition of a point of contact is in Van Til's eyes another flaw of its worldview originated with the process of admixture with different sorts of non-Christian movements of thought.

2.2.2.6 Apologetical Integrity and Strength

Finally, Van Til often stresses the fact obvious to him that any compromised apologetical system like Roman Catholicism is deprived of any serious, powerful, and thorough appeal and argument for the non-Christian to endorse the Christian faith. In his words, "assuming the correctness of the starting point and the method of the natural man in the natural sphere it cannot logically ask

¹⁶² DF, 57.

¹⁶³ Cf. CTK, 156-168; *Doctrine of Scripture*, 31-35.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. CA, 38-58; DF, 67-95. On this aspect on Van Til apologetics, cf. Frame (1995) 416-417.

¹⁶⁵ CA, 42.

men to accept the authority of God even in the spiritual sphere".¹⁶⁶ In this line of systemic thought, theological adjustment to apostate ideas brings significant loss of apologetical integrity and strength. Because the concept and the practice of synthesis speak of the essence of Roman Catholicism, Catholicism itself is not for Van Til a real, credible alternative to any secular or religious worldview.

2.2.3 The Relationship Between Roman Catholicism and Orthodox Protestantism in Van Til's View

During the course of the previous paragraphs it has already become apparent what now needs to be explicitly stated. Van Til is a fervent opponent of Roman Catholicism. His sense of opposition seems not to be motivated by some peripheral issues but by a absolutely central concern. In his systemic approach, the conflict between historic Protestantism can be reduced to "a fundamental point of difference"¹⁶⁷ which could be articulated in several ways as Van Til has attempted to do but whose presuppositional thrust would always remain the same. Until that "dramatic cleavage"¹⁶⁸ is ~~not~~ dealt with adequately on the Roman Catholic part, the relationship is bound to be marked by continuing hostility, at least on the Protestant part. The ecumenical jargon is not the slightest component of Van Til's theological language nor is the ecumenical effort of any sort a qualifying aspect of his agenda.

2.2.4 Conclusion

Beyond the issue of singling out areas of possible agreements or sharp disagreements with his views, a final observation should be made as far as Van Til's work as a Christian apologist is concerned. He has the rather unusual merit among theologians of arguing a clear-cut position, and, in its own terms, a generally consistent case. His theological system is worked out through and through both in wholeheartedly defending his Reformed orthodoxy and in

¹⁶⁶ DF, 139. Similar considerations can be found in DF, 57, 297; RPMT, 77; *The Great Debate Today* (1970) 91.

¹⁶⁷ CA, 45; DF, 77; CB, 225; RPMT, 76 and 104.

¹⁶⁸ RPMT, 76.

vigorously attacking other frameworks of thought. This characterisation of his apologetics is also carried out in his evaluation of Roman Catholicism.

Methodologically speaking, his systemic approach does sometimes prevent him from dealing more extensively with Catholic sources themselves. He often seems to deductively presume what Catholicism holds rather than actually following the train of reasoning of Roman Catholic individual theologians or official *magisterium*. Moreover, from a theological point of view, he has not invested as many energies in studying post-Vatican II developments as he has done in essaying thomistic Catholicism. Therefore, Van Til's post-Vatican II perspectives are only sketched and in need of further elaboration to acquire a higher degree of theological plausibility.

These superficial critical remarks, however, do not intend to diminish at all Van Til's fundamental importance in contributing to shape a bold, courageous, and respectable Evangelical approach to Roman Catholicism.

2.3 DAVID F. WELLS

From within contemporary American Evangelicalism, none like David Wells has been working over the last twenty-five years on the ^{URGENT} task of providing the movement with a theologically constructed definition of the Evangelical identity as it is confronted with the quandary of modernity.¹⁶⁹ In this strategic enterprise both for the present solidity and future survival of historic Evangelicalism itself, Wells' critique has to be commended for refusing self-complacency and glorification and for adopting a thorough self-questioning, at times devastating, line of assessment. In his trenchant analysis, present-day Evangelicalism is so entangled in modernity's plausibility structures that its overall theological and spiritual physiognomy has become increasingly

¹⁶⁹ Cf. in particular *The Evangelicals* edited by Wells and Woodbridge (1975), "An American Evangelical Theology" (1984), "No Offense: I am an Evangelical" (1987), *Christian Faith and Practice in the Modern World* edited by Noll and Wells (1988), "On Being Evangelical" (1993), "Evangelical Theology Today" by Noll-Plantinga-Wells (1995).

blurred,¹⁷⁰ and only an urgent recovery of the sense of God *qua* the biblical God could possibly reverse this corrupting trend.¹⁷¹

Beside this prominent axis in Wells' theological endeavour, Roman Catholicism finds its place as a corollary field of research in which he has refined his theological expertise from the closing of the Second Vatican Council onwards. Within this specific domain explored in two books¹⁷² and several articles or chapters,¹⁷³ three important poles of his discourse deserve to be considered in some detail: firstly, the hermeneutical difficulties raised by the study of the official documents of Vatican II; secondly, the major theological areas, issues and themes in which Roman Catholic theology is labouring in the aftermath of the Council; and thirdly, the issue regarding the presumptive delayed impact of Modernism on its theological achievements.

2.3.1 The Interpretative Crux of Vatican II

Revolution in Rome is the first of Wells' noteworthy exercises on Roman Catholic theology.¹⁷⁴ In this preliminary introduction to the outcomes of the Council from the perspective of an Evangelical theologian, he points to the fact that to those who have not been trained in the "sapiential" tradition of the Catholic way of theologising which is so constitutionally steeped in the all-encompassing "et-et" approach, the documents produced by the Council on some points seem to endorse "mutually incompatible theologies".¹⁷⁵ According to Wells, two dissonant voices, one conservative and one progressive, are often distinctively recognisable in the texts, especially when the two parties have not

¹⁷⁰ Cf. *No Place for Truth* (1993).

¹⁷¹ This is the main thrust of *God in the Wasteland* (1994); cf. also "Modernity and Theology" (1994).

¹⁷² *Revolution in Rome* (1972, hereafter RR) and *The Prophetic Theology of George Tyrrell* (1981, hereafter PTGT).

¹⁷³ "Change and Decay" (1970), "The Future of the Church" (1971), "The Pope as Antichrist" (1972), "Tradition" (1975), "Recent Roman Catholic Theology" (1976), *The Search for Salvation* (1978, hereafter SS) 140-162, *The Person of Christ* (1984) 165-170.

¹⁷⁴ This book has recently been defined as "the wisest and most cogently and compactly argued commentary (on post-Vatican II Catholicism) written by an evangelical"; cf. Armstrong (1994) 319-320, n. 11.

¹⁷⁵ RR, 26 and 91.

reached an agreed compromise. *Dei Verbum* is the Constitution which Wells samples in some depth to give evidence of this combined presence of opposing theological tendencies;¹⁷⁶ beside the rehearsal of the traditional position on biblical inerrancy as stated at Trent in 1546, maintained in the *Syllabus Errorum* in 1864, reaffirmed at the First Vatican Council in 1870, and eventually advocated in the encyclical *Pascendi* in 1907, *Dei Verbum* (11) qualifies the extent of inerrancy by restricting it only to the truths regarding God's saving purpose in Christ. The doctrine of absolute, unlimited inerrancy inherited from centuries of Church pronouncements is still held in *Dei Verbum* but, at the same time, it is also sensibly modified in a direction pointing to a view of Scripture's relative or limited inerrancy. This juxtaposition of ideas¹⁷⁷ introduces a "frustrating element" in the interpretation of the conciliar document since "inerrancy can apparently be justified or denied from the same statement".¹⁷⁸ Another example of the same sort of conciliar ambiguity can be traced in the blatant contrast between the fairly progressive thrust of *Lumen Gentium* and the substantial repudiation at its key points as expressed in the *Nota explicativa Praevia*.¹⁷⁹

So, the unescapable question "which interpretation is correct?"¹⁸⁰ is reposed in each chapter of *Revolution in Rome* which actually echoes the quest for clarification by applying it to many doctrinal areas as they have been revisited by Vatican II. Indeed, the whole of the Council's teaching could be questioned in the following terms: "Authority: Inward or Outward?",¹⁸¹ "God: in the Earthly or the Heavenly City?",¹⁸² "Christianity: a Broad or Narrow Definition?",¹⁸³ "The Church: the People or the Pope?".¹⁸⁴ This manifold range

¹⁷⁶ Idem, 27-32.

¹⁷⁷ Wells speaks of "juxtaposed ideas", 54 and 92; in this respect, cf. also PTGT, 58.

¹⁷⁸ Idem, 32 (italics in the original).

¹⁷⁹ Idem, 32-34. On *Lumen Gentium*, cf. also 86-100.

¹⁸⁰ Idem, 32; elsewhere, Wells formulates the question in different terms: "who speaks for Rome today?", 10, or "how do we interpret?", 33 and 54.

¹⁸¹ Idem, 35-45.

¹⁸² Idem, 46-68.

¹⁸³ Idem, 69-85.

¹⁸⁴ Idem, 86-100.

of weighty questions share a common denominator, that is the interpretative enigma which the texts are woven in without the provision of clues for its solution.

Of course, for Wells, the issue is not merely hermeneutical but has a wider theological significance in that what appear to be equivocal texts which puzzle a non-Catholic reader are a likely reflection of a "divided mind"¹⁸⁵ which has forged them and which is a vivid metaphor depicting the state of modern Roman Catholicism as sanctioned by Vatican II. Despite the numerous attempts to present at least "a façade of unity",¹⁸⁶ the sharp division between conservative and progressive theological wings is as deep as entailing "two world-views, two ideologies, two different conceptions of the Church".¹⁸⁷

In the examination of the Council's proceedings, the observer clearly spots an unsettled conflict within the Catholic Church; however fluid the situation might have appeared at the beginning of the Seventies, Wells is convinced that the future stance of the Church, if not the present yet, lies in the broad consensus reached by those bishops, theologians, and movements identifiable as progressive.¹⁸⁸ Vatican II bears witness to "a state of flux"¹⁸⁹ within the Church ^{LEADING} to a transient and fragile compromise, but whose direction is nevertheless already determined by the ever-growing influence of the progressive agenda which will eventually impose itself, perhaps with the convocation of a Third Vatican Council sometime in the Eighties¹⁹⁰.

What is questionable in Wells' otherwise illuminating analysis is the underlying assumption that the temporary juxtaposition of diverging theologies in the Council's documents has necessarily to end with the definitive affirmation of one party over the other. In so doing, he still operates within a typical old Protestant "aut-aut" mindset, thus failing to come to terms with the Roman

¹⁸⁵ Chapter Two is entitled "Rome's divided mind".

¹⁸⁶ Idem, 32.

¹⁸⁷ Idem, 100. In addition to that, Wells refers also to Schillebeeckx who speaks of "two entirely different worlds", 22.

¹⁸⁸ In this rank Wells includes theologians like Daniel Callahan, Leslie Dewart, Hans Küng, Edward Schillebeeckx, Jean Daniélou, Yves Congar, Louis Bouyer, and Karl Rahner, 11.

¹⁸⁹ Idem, 13.

Catholic well trained epistemological ability to deal with theological diversity in terms of *complexio oppositorum*. What the Evangelical Wells perceives as an unbearable cacophony inevitably to be sorted out might instead be appreciated as a brilliant stereophony in Roman Catholic perception. In this respect, it seems feasible that few observers would deny the existence of several tensions within the conciliar teaching; however, scholarly but also magisterial Catholic theology has sufficient cognitive equipment to locate different doctrinal poles within a wide enough synthesis in whose theological rationale contradictions can be reconciled. This absolutely fundamental aspect of the Roman Catholic genius is somehow overlooked in Wells' evaluation.

2.3.2 The Theological Agenda Promoted by Vatican II

The hermeneutical issue does not exhaust Wells' attempt to shape an Evangelical critique to contemporary Roman Catholicism. He is also concerned to outline the main significant drifts in its theological framework granted conciliar *imprimatur*¹⁹¹ as well as authoritative encouragement in the Sixties. This considerable shake, prompted by the *ressourcement* of biblical and patristic sources and by a more open attitude toward secular trends of thought, is the combined result of "different emphases, different priorities, and varying approaches"¹⁹² impinging on the Catholic theological fabric.

Amongst the many facets of the doctrinal transition that could be mentioned, the changes with more far-reaching implications are in the area of the understanding of the nature-grace correlation.¹⁹³ Taking leave of the dichotomic two-layered view of reality associated with the Thomistic tradition, the new theology fostered by the Council sees the natural and the supernatural "as blended and intermingled in one another"¹⁹⁴ whereby grace is not distantly above nature but inextricably within it; the world is then a graced composite

¹⁹⁰ Idem, 33.

¹⁹¹ "A legal base", RR, 34.

¹⁹² "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", 305.

¹⁹³ Wells expounds it in RR, 47-68 and SS, 141-158.

¹⁹⁴ RR, 50.

whole where neither element exists in separation from the other.¹⁹⁵ In Wells's ways of putting it, the new vision is that "grace is found *in* nature not *on* nature"¹⁹⁶ or, elsewhere in his work, that "the supernatural is now merged into the natural".¹⁹⁷ The unfolding of this onto-theological presupposition entails that "the reality of God has become identified with the reality of the earthly city, the sacred is found *in* the secular, Christ is *in* the world".¹⁹⁸

The consequences of the reconfiguration of the nature-grace relationship are quantitatively numerous, and qualitatively they carry enormous theological weight; some of them are already plainly envisaged in conciliar documents, others only granted utmost doctrinal authorization for theologians to explore and develop further.

At the level concerning the basic structure of the Roman Catholic worldview, the Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes* is an incontrovertible step in coming to terms with secular reality no longer perceived as an alien realm for the Church to oppose, but as the theologically legitimated place for her mission to be carried out.¹⁹⁹

As far as anthropology is concerned, the overcoming of a dualist perspective on the study of man, leads the Council to insist on the Church's interest in "man himself, whole and entire", that is descriptively, "body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will".²⁰⁰ Moreover, considering his ontological receptivity for grace, man is viewed as an intrinsically religious being in whom grace "is experienced as a part of man's own self";²⁰¹ on the basis of this new

¹⁹⁵ In RR, 52, n. 3, Wells comments: "The prophet of this development was Teilhard de Chardin, but the most brilliant exponent is Karl Rahner".

¹⁹⁶ "The Future of the Church", 166 (*italics in the original*).

¹⁹⁷ RR, 61.

¹⁹⁸ *Idem*, 54 (*italics in the original*). It has to be added that, according to Wells, this move does not mean an endorsement of "the new secular theology"; it is rather another instance of a juxtaposition of ideas within the conciliar documents.

¹⁹⁹ RR, 49; cf. also "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", pp. 306-310, where Wells expounds the Constitution's thrust against the background of previous magisterial teachings.

²⁰⁰ *Gaudium et Spes*, 3 quoted by Wells in "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", 308.

²⁰¹ SS, 144.

anthropological sensitivity, Karl Rahner would construe his category of the "supernatural existential".²⁰²

Stemming from the doctrine of the universal presence of grace and from the consequential positive evaluation of man's religiousness in all its phenomenological variety, an "incipient universalism"²⁰³ streams beneath the surface of the conciliar texts. In the interface between ecclesiological awareness and soteriological openness, this shift means that the traditional "Catholic particularism" is thus in need of being related to a newly appreciated "universal religious vision".²⁰⁴ In terms of the chief soteriological model of reference in conceiving redemption, the focus of salvation has gradually become the idea of deification as formulated in the Eastern orthodox tradition at the expense of that of justification purported by Protestant theology.²⁰⁵

As for the eschatological nature of salvation, since God's redemptive plan is not accomplished out of the world but in the world, the axis of its occurring takes a horizontal incline and an earthly scope, thus resembling some key features of the so called "political theologies".²⁰⁶

Wells' assessment of this radically reshaped nature-grace correlation is sketchy length-wise, yet theologically telling.²⁰⁷ If compared with the traditional Thomistic version, the modern one endorsed by the Council seems to him to be rather a further refinement than a substantial correction, and the proof of this daring assertion would be "the refusal to change any mariological tenet",²⁰⁸ there the Roman Catholic structure of grace remains untouched with its stress on

²⁰² Cf. Wells' brief presentation of Rahner's "supernatural existential" in SS, 143-146.

²⁰³ "Change and Decay", 7; cf. also SS, 157-158. In "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", Wells writes that in modern Catholicism there is "the recognition that genuine, saving experience of God is to be found outside Catholicism and indeed, outside of Christianity, perhaps even among atheists", 298.

²⁰⁴ "Change and Decay", 6; on the relationship between the principle of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* and the Vatican II, cf. RR, 69-85 and SS, 147-148.

²⁰⁵ Cf. RR, 57-58.

²⁰⁶ Cf. RR, 50-61.

²⁰⁷ RR, 61-68 and SS, 153-158.

²⁰⁸ SS, 161, n. 47. In RR, dealing with Mary's "unresolved problem", Wells quotes Karl Barth writing of "the one heresy of the Roman Catholic Church"

the necessity of human co-operation, and this persistent element casts doubts on the real modification of the overall framework. In fairness, while arguing the continuity in Roman Catholic belief, Wells readily acknowledges the "solid gains" achieved by Vatican II on this crucial point in terms of a renewed emphasis on scriptural teaching, God's initiative in grace, the less wooden functioning of the sacraments, the subjective side of the Christian life, and the reinterpretation of the *extra ecclesiam nulla salus* formula;²⁰⁹ yet, these welcomed steps have not affected "to any significant degree the soteriological core, the nature-grace correlation".²¹⁰ Wells recalls that Luther pointed out that the Roman Catholic nature-grace relationship rested on the Aristotelian theory of virtue which had been translated into Christian theological categories. The reiteration operated by Vatican II and maintained in contemporary Catholicism is still heavily dependent on that Christianized Aristotelian background, the major points of contact being a "weak and insufficiently developed" doctrine of sin and an incipiently universalist doctrine of grace.²¹¹ Unreformed Pelagian tendencies within the Roman Catholic Church have now contributed to the birth of a new kind of "humanism", religious in its outlook but increasingly "less ecclesiastical and more comfortably secular".²¹²

Elsewhere, in appraising the new teaching on nature and grace and while granting that Scripture does not envisage a two-layered reality, Wells takes issue with the ever-present danger in contemporary Catholic theology of blurring the proper biblical distinction between God and creation whose outcome would necessarily lead towards Eastern pantheism or secular immanentism.²¹³

In addressing the nature-grace issue as it has been sanctioned by Vatican II and developed in post-conciliar Catholic theology, Wells surely hits the target that any serious Evangelical critique of Roman Catholicism should aim at in the attempt consistently to tackle what is fundamentally at stake with Catholicism as

and Philip Hugues arguing that "Nothing less than the Gospel of our redemption is at stake here", 118-119.

²⁰⁹ Idem, 154-155.

²¹⁰ Idem, 155.

²¹¹ Idem, 157-158.

²¹² Idem, 158.

²¹³ RR, 52-53 and 61-66.

a multi-faceted whole, seen at least from an Evangelical vantage point.²¹⁴ The fact that he mainly explores its soteriological dimension should not give the impression that it has an exclusive or mere soteriological thrust; on the contrary, his critical analysis in this sphere should also be pursued in all other theological areas given the overarching presuppositional character of the nature-grace correlation. Yet, this recognition of is not clearly affirmed by Wells who seems to identify the core issue in soteriological terms²¹⁵ rather than acknowledging its much wider bearing.

2.3.3 The Legacy of Modernism on the Theology of Vatican II

In all its innovative force and even more innovative potentiality, the Second Vatican Council's theological impulse has not had the character of a sudden, abrupt, unexpected storm in the otherwise rather static Catholic scene. It is Wells' contention that the historical roots and the theological background of the *aggiornamento* fostered by the Council have to be traced back also to the radical movement known as Catholic Modernism which came to the fore in Europe at the turn of the Twentieth century as a dramatic move to reach an "intellectual rapprochement"²¹⁶ between Roman Catholicism and contemporary culture by means of according full citizenship within Catholicism itself to biblical and historical criticism, a questioning attitude toward traditional authority, modern self-consciousness, and non-Thomistic philosophical systems;²¹⁷ the hierarchy's opposition to what was perceived as a mortal threat to the Church was so fierce that its polemical *esprit* and modern *mentalité*, were inflexibly condemned. However, the Council could be understood in terms of "the long-delayed

²¹⁴ In "An American Evangelical Theology", Wells rightly points to the centrality of the nature-grace relationship in the shaping of an Evangelical theology too.

²¹⁵ It has to be specified that the context of his nature-grace discussion is a book on the doctrine of salvation (SS) and therefore its focus is soteriological. In RR however, Wells deals more with the God-world aspect of the relationship and, surprisingly and somehow puzzlingly, he writes that "the whole thrust of the new position lies in its eschatology", 64.

²¹⁶ PTGT, 12.

²¹⁷ The whole first chapter of PTGT, 7-16, is an useful introduction to the Modernist movement; cf. also "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", 288-294.

reaction to the shifting intellectual climate, not merely of this century but also of the last"²¹⁸ which Modernism absorbed in advance but was not allowed to relaunch within the Catholic world. Some of the ideas that the Catholic hierarchy tried to repress by means of the encyclicals *Aeterni Patris* (1879), *Lamentabili sane exitu*, and *Pascendi dominici gregis* (1907) as well as with many disciplinary measures could not be stifled nor erased,²¹⁹ and were now officially introduced within the orthodox doctrine of the Catholic faith by Vatican II.²²⁰ Another instance of the Roman Catholic epistemological ability to hold together a *complexio oppositorum* is here again evident.

Wells' controversial argument has two interconnected sides, one historiographical, the other properly theological. If Vatican II is reckoned as being the "end" more than the "beginning"²²¹ of a process of change, the question to raise is whether this tortuous stream which originated with the Modernist avant garde has passed through discernible stages of development before its conciliar finalising. The answer is that the point of intersection between the Modernist wave and the reception of Vatican II is the historico-theological intermediary role of the *nouvelle théologie* emerged between the Forties and the Fifties particularly in France.²²² For Wells, the penetration of modernist ideas and concerns within ecclesiastical structures and official teachings has to be attributed to the seminal work of de Lubac, Bouillard, and von Balthasar who, unlike the Modernists of the turn of the century, were extremely careful to remain within the existing disciplinary boundaries set by the Church but, in continuity with the Modernists, promoted a comparable theological agenda capable of producing a formidable turning point within Roman Catholicism. Though the encyclical *Humani Generis* (1950) was issued to indirectly warn the new theology about the temptation of conceding too much

²¹⁸ "Recent Roman Catholic Theology", 287.

²¹⁹ "When the Church closed to the door on Modernism, it could not close the door on the central problem with which the Modernists were struggling - the relation between Christ and culture, the sacred and the profane", PTGT, 5.

²²⁰ "By accepting a plurality of theologies under the rubric of orthodoxy, the Council did endorse some ideas upon which the Church had formerly frowned", PTGT, 1.

²²¹ *Idem*, 3.

ground to secular thought, eventually, at the Council, theologians like Karl Rahner and Yves Congar completed the grafting process by backing the ratification of the new trend at the highest magisterial level. The startling paradox is that the Vatican II actually approved notions and endorsed tendencies which a few decades earlier "were declared to be the quintessence of all heresy".²²³ Looking at what has happened retrospectively, it does not seem hazardous for Wells to ask whether the Modernists may have lost the battle but have finally won the war.²²⁴

Apart from this general historical overview, Wells devotes an in-depth study to the *Prophetic Theology of George Tyrrell* who had been one of the chief characters within the Modernist movement and who was excommunicated in 1908 for his anti-papal views. Here again, the comparative investigation between Tyrrell's writings and the Council's documents²²⁵ authorises Wells to speak of similar methodology²²⁶ and areas of convergence between the two,²²⁷ remarkable parallels²²⁸ and affinities,²²⁹ significant echoes²³⁰ and historical antecedents²³¹ or anticipations,²³² even to the point of detecting quasi duplications²³³ and complete agreements;²³⁴ with respect to Vatican II, Tyrrell

²²² "The Future of the Church", 165-166 and PTGT, 1-5.

²²³ "The Future of the Church", 166.

²²⁴ *No Place for Truth*, 121.

²²⁵ Of course, Wells is not unaware of the cluster of methodological problems involved in such a comparison; cf. PTGT, 36. However, denying "any kind of theological relationship between the two movements" would appear to be "an infinitely more difficult route to take" than acknowledging their affinity on some key points, 80.

²²⁶ *Idem*, 36.

²²⁷ *Idem*, 39 on religious consciousness.

²²⁸ *Idem*, 67 on tradition; 79-80 on the natural-supernatural relationship, revelation, and the nature of the Church.

²²⁹ *Idem*, 71 on general affinities.

²³⁰ *Idem*, 79 on revelation.

²³¹ *Idem*, 68-69 on the relationship between the magisterium and tradition.

²³² *Idem*, 59 on revelation.

²³³ *Idem*, 65 on revelation.

²³⁴ *Idem*, 68 on the relationship between the magisterium and tradition.

appears therefore a "prescient formulator"²³⁵ and, as the title of the book suggests, a "prophet before his time".²³⁶

As far as the presumptive theological common ground and shared framework are concerned, Wells focuses his attention on at least four main issues which reveal their theological proximity: the ever-resurgant nature-supernature relationship revised via the notion of sacramentality;²³⁷ the paramount role played by man's religious consciousness in sustaining the universal Christward relation;²³⁸ the concept of revelation as a carefully constructed combination between the Liberal view of revelation as experience and the more traditional identification of revelation with the biblical text;²³⁹ finally, the less juridical and more sacramental doctrine of the Church seen in the light of the *Populus Dei* motif.²⁴⁰

Wells' bold, and perhaps unchallengeable thesis on this whole matter shows how dramatic a turn magisterial Catholic theology has taken in a short period of time and how the Catholicising principle has had to work at its best at Vatican II in the process of ²insuring a newly gained orthodox appearance to a previously rejected set of beliefs and theological mindset.

2.3.4 Conclusion

In his comprehensive knowledge of both Evangelical theology and movement at large and contemporary Roman Catholicism sanctioned at the Second Vatican Council, Wells is too well aware that "the stereotype of Catholic theology held by many Evangelicals has been rendered obsolete and irrelevant",²⁴¹ indeed, the old Evangelical polemic based on traditional Catholicism is utterly "anachronistic".²⁴² In the light of the changed as well as changing situation, he

²³⁵ Idem, 42.

²³⁶ Idem, 42, 54 and 80; in "The Pope as Antichrist", Wells writes that "At the Second Vatican Council many of Tyrrell's positions were quietly adopted, though, of course, his intemperance can never be pardoned", 283.

²³⁷ PTGT, 36-39 and 79.

²³⁸ Idem, 39-42.

²³⁹ Idem, 79-80.

²⁴⁰ Idem, 80; cf. also "The Pope as Antichrist", 277-283.

²⁴¹ "Change and Decay", 6. Cf. also RR, 101.

²⁴² Idem, 8.

has called Evangelicals to construe a "new apologetic" in their approach to Roman Catholicism;²⁴³ as a matter of fact, a part from appealing for it, Wells has also exemplified in his works the intellectual brightness and theological integrity for that new Evangelical apologetic to be intellectually respectable and theologically robust.

2.4 DONALD G. BLOESCH

Donald Bloesch is another important theologian in contemporary American Evangelicalism whose writings are worth considering in order to acquire another direction in the fairly diversified range of present-day Evangelical perspectives on Roman Catholicism. In his on-going prolific work both as an academic and as a more popular author,²⁴⁴ he has been chiefly engaged in exploring what constitutes the "essentials"²⁴⁵ of an Evangelical theology which, while seeking a viable alternative beyond the perilous liberal drift and the stiflingly embattled fundamentalist position, would cautiously come to grips with Barthianism²⁴⁶ and duly appreciate the bountiful heritage of the Christian tradition before and beyond the Reformation legacy.²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Ibidem.

²⁴⁴ McKim reports that Bloesch has written or edited some twenty-five books plus few hundred shorter pieces; cf. McKim (1993) 388. For a partial bibliography updated in 1983, cf. his *The Future of Evangelical Christianity* (hereafter FEC, 1983) 190-192. In recent years, Bloesch has begun publishing the first five of a seven-volume dogmatics: *A Theology of Word and Spirit* (1992), *Holy Scripture* (1994), *God the Almighty* (1996), *Jesus Christ* (1998) and *The Holy Spirit* (2000).

²⁴⁵ From the title of his two-volume *Essentials of Evangelical Theology* (hereafter EET, 1978 and 1979).

²⁴⁶ Karl Barth is admittedly one of Bloesch's theological mentors even though Bloesch does not wish to be known as Barthian or neo-Barthian; cf. his "A Reassessment of Karl Barth" in *The Evangelical Renaissance* (hereafter ER, 1973) 80-100, and "Karl Barth: Appreciation and Reservations" (1986). His overall positive evaluation of Barth used to be rather atypical in American Evangelicalism until the early Eighties; cf. G. Bolich, *Karl Barth and Evangelicalism* (1980).

²⁴⁷ In particular "the church fathers and doctors of the medieval church": FEC, 49; Anabaptism, Pietism, and Puritanism: EET, vol. 1, 11.

It should be borne in mind that Bloesch's interest in Roman Catholicism is not to be regarded as distinct in itself but arises in the course of his wide investigation on the salient tenets of the Evangelical identity which looks for a renewed awareness of its historical roots, spiritual freshness, and doctrinal richness. Here again, the Evangelical theologian trying to articulate the theological boundary of his own confessional framework is necessarily confronted with the obligation somehow to deal with Roman Catholicism even if that remains a subsidiary element in his work as a whole.

2.4.1 Catholicism as a Constitutive Ideal Type of Christianity

In Bloesch's theological vocabulary, Catholicism has a double semantic connotation; on the one hand it has a typological thrust, on the other an institutional significance. In sketching the outline of his first systematic project, he argues that biblical Christianity is - or should be, or even must be - a symphonic combination of both Evangelical and Catholic "themes" or "types of theological orientation";²⁴⁸ each of these is conceived as having its own particular emphases and as transcending particular ecclesiastical institutions, but both are equally incomplete in themselves if taken in isolation from the other because of their inherent complementary relationship. Historically, neither type has existed in pure state; actually, they can be traceable across denominational lines in various degrees and in a plurality of gradations, yet in all phases and movements of the life of the Christian church.

Leaving the distinctiveness of Evangelicalism aside,²⁴⁹ by referring to Catholicism Bloesch has in mind the co-fundamental type whose main concerns are the institution and rites of the church in the light of her historico-theological

²⁴⁸ EET, vol. 1, 9; "theme" is also used in 1,13.

²⁴⁹ Elsewhere, Bloesch lists "the hallmarks of Evangelicalism" as follows: the sovereignty of God, the divine authority of Scripture, total depravity, the substitutionary atonement, salvation by grace through faith alone, the primacy of proclamation, scriptural holiness, the Church's spiritual mission, and the personal return of Christ; cf. ER, 48-79. According to him, these doctrinal features "can also be found in other schools and branches of Christendom, but they have been given a special emphasis in the history of evangelicalism" (Idem, 77). A substantially similar position is also advocated in EET, vol. 1, 7-23 and FEC, 8-22.

tradition, the universality of grace and the community of faith, the incarnation and the body of Christ, and the means of grace.²⁵⁰ Using rather loosely the twin categories in which Tillich depicts the religion of the Spiritual Presence,²⁵¹ Bloesch too can speak of the "Catholic substance" in terms of "continuity with the tradition of the whole church, including its sacramental side".²⁵² With Tillich again, this "Catholic substance" is meant to be constitutively interwoven with the "Protestant principle" which, according to Bloesch but this time far beyond Tillich, is nothing but a synonymic expression standing for the Evangelical type of theological orientation within Christianity.²⁵³ In this line of thought, the "evangelical message" and the "catholic heritage" are both utterly indispensable for a "biblical, ecumenical church".²⁵⁴

Given these two basic and all important typologies for the theological definition of the Christian faith, Christianity itself could ideally then be denoted in the same breadth as "Evangelical" and "Catholic" in order to retain its authenticity as well as its completeness and effectiveness.²⁵⁵ In other words, in healthy Christianity the two themes are always to be found paired in organic symbiosis. Similarly, within the various possibilities of classifying the different strands within the whole of Christendom, "catholic evangelicalism" is the movement whose qualifying feature is the attempt to stress the Evangelical essentials within the context of catholic faith.²⁵⁶ If this is a fair definition,

²⁵⁰ Cf. EET, vol. 1, 9-10.

²⁵¹ e.g. Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 3 (1963), 6 and 245. Other references to Bloesch's usage of the Tillichian "catholic substance" are FEC, 48 and EET, vol. 1, 12. Bloesch just quotes this expression without dealing with its significance in Tillich.

²⁵² EET, vol. 2, 278.

²⁵³ Cf. EET, vol. 1, 9-10.

²⁵⁴ EET, vol. 1, 12.

²⁵⁵ "Evangelicalism to be complete and effective must be Catholic as well. Catholicism to be authentic must be Evangelical as well", EET, vol. 1, 12.

²⁵⁶ FEC, 48-52. At this point, it is worth mentioning that Avery Dulles (1985) 2 refers to the same pages as an example of a trend toward "evangelical catholicity" that may be found even within conservative Evangelical circles. However, Bloesch never uses the expression "evangelical catholicity" preferring instead to qualify the substantive "evangelical(ism)" with the adjective "catholic". Cf. also EET, vol. 2, 283-290. It is also interesting that while the Evangelical Bloesch speaks of "catholic evangelicalism", the catholic Fournier

Bloesch argues that both Luther and Calvin should then be considered as historical chief characters of this integrated blend of Christianity in that "they sought the reform of the Catholic Church, not the creation of a sect divorced from catholic tradition".²⁵⁷

Turning to the contemporary situation, it is Bloesch's contention that "catholic evangelicalism" is the only option able confidently to face and possibly overcome the dangerous challenges posed to the Christian faith by Enlightenment secularism, reactionary fundamentalism, and radical liberalism.²⁵⁸ For the Church at large, the primary need to strive for "an evangelical-catholic synthesis"²⁵⁹ in which catholic continuity and Evangelical fidelity would join together is ever present. In confronting the spiritual crisis at the end of the Twentieth-century, the recovery of a "catholic evangelicalism" is a stringent task for all Christians which, according to Bloesch, should be particularly concerned with Church unity in terms of "the visible actualization of the spiritual unity that already exists within and between the churches".²⁶⁰

Building on this set of convictions, it should not sound surprising that Bloesch would deem his personal theological endeavour as belonging to the "catholic evangelical" tradition,²⁶¹ whose avowed aim is to promote "Evangelical-Catholic unity, encompassing the churches of the East as well as of

speaks of "evangelical catholics"; the order of the words is significantly not accidental.

²⁵⁷ FEC, 165, n. 68. In EET, vol. 1, 12, Bloesch writes that Luther and Calvin "sought to stand in the historic tradition of the Roman church and appealed to many of the church fathers as well as Scripture"; cf. also EET, vol. 2, 283 and ER, 49-50. Bloesch lists as exponents of catholic Evangelicalism Count von Zinzendorf, Peter Forsyth, John Nevin, Nathan Söderblom, Wilhelm Löhe, Daniel Jenkins, and Thomas Torrance; cf. EET, vol. 1, 12 and vol. 2, 296, n. 73.

²⁵⁸ EET, vol. 1, 14-17. Elsewhere, Bloesch states that "the theological options today are liberalism or modernism (whether in the guise of neo-Protestantism or neo-Catholicism), a reactionary Evangelicalism or Fundamentalism, and a catholic evangelicalism, which alone is truly evangelical and biblical", EET, vol. 2, 283.

²⁵⁹ EET, vol. 2, 290.

²⁶⁰ EET, vol. 2, 289.

²⁶¹ FEC, 51 and 165, n. 67; cf. also *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 13. More recently, Bloesch has defined himself a "centrist evangelical in the sense of remaining in continuity with the message of Holy Scripture and the wisdom of sacred tradition", *God the Almighty*, 12.

the West".²⁶² In this respect, the ideal typological combination between the two motifs functions as the archetypal construction which inspires and directs the consuming effort to implement the strategically important ecumenical project.

2.4.2 Roman Catholicism as a Historic Institutional Type of Christianity

The last quotation from Bloesch introduces the already mentioned differentiation recognisable in his writings as far as the usage of Catholicism is concerned. Alongside the typological connotation briefly evoked, Catholicism stands also for the religious institution that historically has given prominence to the catholic type in the shaping of its theology and practice; in the West, this is the case of Roman Catholicism though a similar assertion could be referred to Eastern Orthodoxy as well.²⁶³ In the former in particular, its essential elements have been embodied in magisterial, liturgical, and ecclesiastical forms in such a way that the same word can convey both meanings, the ideal type and the historical Church.

This is not to say that the Evangelical theme has been completely missing in Roman Catholicism in the course of the centuries. On the contrary, Bloesch aptly acknowledges that there have been particular events which definitely reflected an unmistakeable Evangelical bent (e.g. the Second Council of Orange with its anti-Pelagian stance),²⁶⁴ or even characters who can be thought as having been deeply influenced by the Evangelical orientation (e.g. Ambrose, Augustine, Bernard of Clairvaux, Thomas Aquinas, and Pascal);²⁶⁵

²⁶² *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 15; cf. also EET, vol. 1, xi and vol. 2, 4. Even the second on-going systematic project "is addressed to the whole church - primarily for the purpose of healing wounds and building bridges", *God the Almighty*, 11.

²⁶³ Rather simplistically, Bloesch often mentions both together; cf. ER, 49; FEC, 12, 51 and 132; "The Challenge Facing the Churches", 218. However, the difference between the two traditions from an Evangelical point of view is that "Eastern Orthodoxy with its concept of theosis, the divinization of man through faith and love, reflects a spirituality that is more remote from the concerns of evangelical faith", EET, vol. 1, 9.

²⁶⁴ Cf. ER, 48 and EET, vol. 1, 7-8.

²⁶⁵ EET, vol. 1, 8. In ER, 49, Bloesch lists also some contemporary theologians like Hans Küng, Ida Friederike Görres, Louis Bouyer, Josef Geiselmann, and Raymond Brown. In FEC, 12, he adds Hans Urs von Balthasar.

more than that, apart from historical instances and individual cases, for Bloesch a consistent Evangelical strand has been always present throughout the history of Roman Catholicism,²⁶⁶ and continues to be an integral part of the present-day Roman Church as a whole.²⁶⁷

On the other hand, while often showing sympathetic appreciation for the manifold strengths of Roman Catholicism in general, Bloesch does not overlook the standard Evangelical critique concerning the presuntive lapses into "sacramentalism and sacerdotalism",²⁶⁸ "ecclesiasticism"²⁶⁹ and "traditionalism"²⁷⁰ which have allegedly crept into the religious fabric of the Church. In this subtly distorted version of the ideal type, no better identified "Romanizing and Latinizing tendencies"²⁷¹ have progressively prevailed in confining the breadth of the ideal type of the catholic vision into a formalistic, crystalized system dangerously obscured by "unbiblical practices and ideas".²⁷² Paradoxically then, the ecclesiastical tradition which bears the same name of the catholic motif has instead produced a deficit of catholicity in its doctrine and piety;²⁷³ therefore, in his opinion, the Roman Church is in constant need of recovering afresh nothing less than the catholic theme which, in turn, can be successfully assimilated only in conjunction with the appropriation of the

²⁶⁶ FEC, 12.

²⁶⁷ Cf. ER, 77 and FEC, 9. According to Bloesch, in contemporary Catholicism the Evangelical cohabits with the sacramentalist-traditionalist strand and the modernist-liberal one, "The Challenge Facing the Churches", 218.

²⁶⁸ EET, vol. 2, 279.

²⁶⁹ FEC, 51.

²⁷⁰ EET, vol. 2, 282.

²⁷¹ This expression is used in reporting one of the basic thrusts of Bela Vassidy's *Christ's Church: Evangelical, Catholic and Reformed* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans 1965); cf. EET, vol. 1, 11.

²⁷² FEC, 51. For example, "(I)n Roman Catholic theology the sacramental grace of baptism preempted the irresistible grace of predestination (stressed by Augustine), and a sacramentalism obscured the personalistic element in Christian faith", EET, vol. 2, 279. However, Bloesch finds "unbiblical practices and ideas" in the Reformation tradition as well, though he does not specify in what respect; cf. FEC, 51.

²⁷³ "The Church of Rome is not catholic enough", FEC, 51; cf. also EET, vol. 1, 10-11. The same is true for the Reformation Churches, so that "(b)oth separated churches now fall short of the fullness of truth that characterizes the invisible

Evangelical one. Unfortunately, Bloesch's outlined critique is not pursued further nor investigated more deeply.

2.4.3 A Sketched Case-Study on Mystical Spirituality and its Influence on Roman Catholicism

So far, attention has been concentrated on the twofold characterization of Catholicism in Bloesch. Apart from those rather general insights, there is also a significant area of his work in which, while dealing with the whole issue of Christian spirituality,²⁷⁴ he has tackled in some detail this specific aspect in the context of the catholic piety.

As elsewhere in Bloesch's discourse, the typological approach is at work here as well.²⁷⁵ According to him, two fundamental types of spirituality can also be discerned in the historical phenomenology of Christian devotion, the "mystical" and the "evangelical",²⁷⁶ or, to put it differently, "Christian mysticism" and "biblical personalism".²⁷⁷ The former is thought to have been dominant in Roman Catholicism²⁷⁸ and Eastern Orthodoxy, whereas the latter is

church - the holy catholic church that crosses all denominational lines", "Is Spirituality Enough?", 152.

²⁷⁴ e.g. *The Crisis of Piety* (1968; hereafter CP) and *The Struggle of Prayer* (1980; hereafter SP).

²⁷⁵ Another application of a typological approach is Bloesch's conviction that contemporary theology, in its attempts to meet the challenges of modernity, is faced with four options, that is being a theology of restoration, accommodation, correlation or confrontation; cf. *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 250-272.

²⁷⁶ In surveying the phenomenological variety of Christian spirituality, Bloesch draws upon Friedrich Heiler's *Prayer. A Study in the History and Psychology of Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press 1958), and lists also primitive or animistic spirituality, ritualistic spirituality, rational or philosophical spirituality, mysticism and prophetic religion; cf. "Is Spirituality Enough?", 143-145. Bloesch often relies on the basic insights of this book: cf., for example, CP, 97-98 and 109-111; EET, vol. 2, 57-58 and SP, passim.

²⁷⁷ SP, 98. Biblical personalism is an expression borrowed from Emil Brunner; cf. CP, 96.

²⁷⁸ "(T)he neo-Platonic mysticism .. is so all-pervasive in Catholicism", EET, vol. 2, 285. In his habit of pouring out lists, Bloesch includes in the rank of catholic mystics Augustine, Thomas Aquinas, Catherine of Genoa, Catherine of Siena, Thomas à Kempis, Teresa of Avila, Brother Lawrence, John of the Cross, Fénelon, Garrigou-Lagrange, and Thomas Merton; cf. CP, 96.

more clearly envisageable in Protestantism, though each tradition has been subject to numerous cross-fertilising interactions between these ideal types.²⁷⁹

Beside the descriptive and comparative presentation of several features of the mystical model behind much of catholic spirituality,²⁸⁰ what particularly marks Bloesch's monographic treatment is his contention regarding the incidence of Hellenistic philosophy and religion on the moulding of catholic spirituality itself. In Christian mysticism, a "tension"²⁸¹ is throughout perceivable between the biblical foundation of the mystics' piety and a "neo-Platonic framework" which subtly undergirds their categories of thought.²⁸² This somewhat artificial combination however is not an isolated phenomenon in the extraordinarily complex encounter between Christianity and the surrounding cultures in the first centuries; rather, it stems from the broader "biblical-classical synthesis"²⁸³ in virtue of which Judeo-Christian motifs were often allowed to be interspersed and blended with Hellenistic categories, emphases, and terminology.²⁸⁴ In this respect and as a matter of historical example of unwholesome compromise, Bloesch often draws upon Anders Nygren's *Agape and Eros* to point to the synthetical nature of the medieval concept of *caritas* as it tried to harmonize the opposing understandings of love as self-sacrificing gift and as self-seeking virtue.²⁸⁵

As far as the devotional side of the Christian faith and experience is concerned, Bloesch's thesis is that the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox traditions, in their apologetic attempt to come to terms with Hellenism, have instead exposed their spirituality to sacrificing "the almost anthropomorphic God of biblical religion for the impersonal or suprapersonal God of mysticism

²⁷⁹ The outcome of the interaction is that "there is a mystical element in all evangelical religion just as there must be an evangelical element in any mysticism that would call itself Christian", CP, 97; cf. also FEC, 12.

²⁸⁰ Cf. CP, 98-112 and SP, 98-108.

²⁸¹ Cf. CP, 95 and "The Challenge Facing the Churches", 219.

²⁸² EET, vol. 2, 281-282; cf. also EET, vol. 1, 17.

²⁸³ "Is Spirituality Enough?", 146.

²⁸⁴ In "Is Spirituality Enough?", 146, Bloesch writes that "at their best (Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodoxy) sought to baptize pagan concepts into the service of the gospel; at their worst they accommodated the biblical vision to a worldview that contradicted gospel spirituality".

and Platonism".²⁸⁶ The startling flaw in the domain of the doctrine of God has given ground to "pantheistic and panentheistic themes"²⁸⁷ in all the Christian mystics who sought a God "beyond and outside of the personal".²⁸⁸ This intrusive process - whose sometimes excessive impact on the Fathers has been aptly recognised by theologians like von Balthasar and Meyendorff²⁸⁹ has impinged on the doctrinal contours and spiritual direction of both West and East. Christian spirituality has then departed from its personalist thrust and has become identified in the ascending quest for "the experience of unity with the divine presence";²⁹⁰ such awesome dimension was thought to be beyond rational and linguistic articulation and achievable through the undergoing of the interconnected stages of "purgation, illumination, union, and ecstasy"²⁹¹ which were considered necessary steps in order for the creature to climb "the mystical ladder of love to heaven".²⁹²

This critical view of Christian mysticism is not to be equated with a complete dismissal of any mystical elements in the life of faith. Bloesch does not deny their existence and importance, provided that they would stand in continuity with the biblical metaphor of being "in Christ" and that this unio mystica would be perfectly tuned with other Scriptural emphases.²⁹³ Not only that, but in his ecumenical project toward a reconciled Christianity, the possibility of a "genuine catholic evangelical spirituality" is indeed contemplated.²⁹⁴ As for the scope of the present research, what strikes most is

²⁸⁵ Cf. CP, 100-101; SP, 102-103 and "Is Spirituality Enough?", 147-148.

²⁸⁶ "Is Spirituality Enough?", 146-147.

²⁸⁷ SP, 104; cf. also CP, 122.

²⁸⁸ CP, 122.

²⁸⁹ "Is Spirituality Enough?", 159; here Bloesch refers to von Balthasar's book *Prayer* (1961) and Meyendorff's *St. Gregory Palamas and Orthodox Spirituality* (1974). Cf. also SP, 118-119 where Bloesch, together with von Balthasar, quotes the Dominican scholar Simon Tugwell.

²⁹⁰ SP, 100. In "Is Spirituality Enough?", 149, Bloesch writes that "(i)n Catholic orthodoxy prevenient grace is necessary to begin the salvific process, but the whole of the Christian life is seen as a mystical ascent or return of the soul to union with God".

²⁹¹ SP, 102.

²⁹² *Idem*, 104.

²⁹³ Cf. CP, 112-124 and SP, 119-121.

²⁹⁴ EET, vol. 2, 285.

the absence of any in-depth endeavour to deal with Roman Catholic mystics in their own specific terms and contexts beyond the sheer generalization regarding what is in any case the extremely problematic and nuanced issue of Christian spirituality.

2.4.4 Conclusion

As already implicitly suggested in the previous sections, Bloesch's level of analysis is rather generic and his major concern is the provision of a roughly sketched picture of Christianity which a preliminary Evangelical apprehension of Roman Catholicism would fit into. His typological categories appear to be more assumed than adequately construed and, given the basic synchronic framework they convey, they even undermine the possibility for historico-theological differentiations to be ascertained. In this respect, the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the post-conciliar developments in Roman Catholic thought, though occasionally referred to in more recent writings,²⁹⁵ have not substantially altered the previously adopted methodology and the overall theological critique. This recognition of several valuational weaknesses, however, must not be disjoined from the awareness of the fairly incidental place of Bloesch's interest in Roman Catholicism within the economy of his work.

In the end, the disturbing frustration which Bloesch's approach creates leads to the conclusion that any perspective on Roman Catholicism which aspires to gain a status of theological thoroughness cannot entirely depend on the mere delineation of ideal types. This may possibly result in a useful didactic, introductory device - granted its continuous striving towards a fair, wide and self-questioning assessment; on the other hand, it will certainly not exhaust the exacting scholarly task which urgently waits upon Evangelical theology in its general outlook, and in its appraisal of Roman Catholicism in particular.

²⁹⁵ Cf., for example, *A Theology of Word and Spirit*, 156-157, 308 and *Holy Scripture*, 143-144.

2.5 HERBERT M. CARSON

As already argued in the first chapter, contemporary Evangelical theology finds itself deeply engaged in the process of attempting to acquire a higher degree of academic respectability. This gradual but not always successful attempt has confronted Evangelical theologians with the enormous task of revising the rather narrow patterns of cultural analysis and intellectual critique inherited from the early Twentieth-century fundamentalism with the aim of adjusting them to the standards practised by the theological community at large. In spite of this on-going transformation, the change has affected only some sections of the Evangelical theological constituency whereas other segments of the same grouping seem to retain the more popular and devotional thrust of their previous works. The fact that much Evangelical literature is still marked by an overall suspicion towards established academic theology and its shared methodological praxis is a significant pointer underlining the resistance of some circles within the movement *vis-à-vis* the above mentioned shift.

In the British scene, Herbert Carson's writings well epitomise this popular trend of theologising which is firmly entrenched particularly in the non-conformist wing of Evangelicalism. His biography, especially his resignation from the Anglican ministry in 1964 and his subsequent pastorates in various independent Baptist Churches,²⁹⁶ indicates his decision to keep to one side of the demarcation line which exists between the two levels of conceiving, constructing and presenting theology. In this context, Carson's fairly abundant ^{WORK} produced on Roman Catholicism²⁹⁷ deserves careful consideration inasmuch as it mirrors rather precisely the usual popular approach and polemical strategy pursued by many conservative Evangelicals *vis-à-vis* Roman Catholicism.

²⁹⁶ Carson's reasons for the breach are to be found in his book *Farewell to Anglicanism* (1969) and, more recently, in his article "Why I Had to Go" (1996); basically, they are all rooted in his deep discontentment concerning Anglican liturgy, episcopacy, baptism and establishmentarianism.

2.5.1 The Popular and Controversial Approach

Whether in a book or in a short article, Carson's investigation of Roman Catholicism appears to be substantially homogeneous in several respects, though it spans a long period of time from the early Sixties to the second half of the Nineties. The main reason for this apparent continuity can perhaps be attributed to the fact that some of the material published in the books is often reused in numerous shorter pieces, or on the contrary, some new insights found in the articles are then inserted and elaborated again in the course of a wider treatment. Moreover, pursuing further this comparative analysis and focusing it particularly on the three books,²⁹⁸ even a perfunctory glance at the indexes shows that they could plausibly be thought of as three subsequent editions of the same work progressively expanded and updated. While they essentially carry a similar argumentative weight and are shaped by the same methodological devices, the only noticeable difference in the three stages is to be found in the main Roman Catholic reference point which is the object of Carson's apologetic enterprise. Within the complex universe of the Roman Catholic magisterium, in each book he singles out a particular authoritative source and deals with it in his analysis of Roman Catholic doctrine giving a critical response to it. This strikingly simplistic procedure entails the identification of a single counterpart and inevitably limits the scope of the inquiry. Thus, if in *Roman Catholicism Today* Carson repeatedly takes issue with Ludwig Ott's *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*, in *Dawn or Twilight?* he often discusses the pronouncements of the Second Vatican Council, whereas in *The Faith of the Vatican* the most frequently quoted Roman Catholic document is the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

In Carson's writings one looks in vain for an extensive bibliographical apparatus or for a highly sophisticated degree of theological argumentation. They are instead chiefly characterised by the straightforward controversial tone of the discourse and by the presentation-rebuttal pattern in which the exposition

²⁹⁷ Apart from those, Carson has also written on worship, a commentary on Colossians, and on various pastoral issues.

²⁹⁸ i.e. *Roman Catholicism Today* (1964; hereafter RCT), *Dawn or Twilight?* (1976; hereafter DT) and *The Faith of the Vatican* (1996; hereafter FV).

of the magisterial position is usually followed by a briefly sketched criticism mainly on biblical grounds. Because Scripture is considered the final authority for testing Christian belief, Carson's writings are full of exegetical exercises of selected biblical texts concerning different aspects of the doctrinal disagreement between Roman Catholics and Evangelical protestants.²⁹⁹

Another interesting feature of Carson's popular approach can be seen in the peculiar motivation which drives him on. In an telling comment, he honestly asserts that his "interest in Roman Catholic teaching is neither triumphalistic nor theoretical but evangelistic".³⁰⁰ The aim which governs his whole effort is not a spiritually sterile "attempt to score debating points"³⁰¹ nor is it an updated apologetical dispute in the old controversialist mood.³⁰² Rather, in confronting Roman Catholicism, Carson strongly believes that a serious distortion of the Gospel is at stake in the doctrinal system constructed by the Roman Church and the reality of this theological deformation is so serious that it is the responsibility of the Evangelical christian to frankly but sympathetically point it out in the light of Gospel teaching by means of engaging in honest discussion with Roman Catholics at any level.

Though totally opposed to any form of ecumenism involving non-Evangelical participants,³⁰³ he nonetheless stresses the need for an open and thorough debate between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals on the non-negotiable condition that such an interaction should fully endorse Hans Küng's wishful proposal as its controlling principle: "let it be the Gospel of Christ which decides".³⁰⁴

The assumption behind this kind of evangelistic thrust is that the Roman Catholic believer should be helped to realise that what she holds as a Roman

²⁹⁹ According to Carson, they are the locus of authority, the relationship between Scripture and tradition, the sacraments, the priesthood, the Mass and transubstantiation, mariology, the purgatory and the doctrine of justification.

³⁰⁰ "Surveying the scene in Rome" (1980) 24.

³⁰¹ RCT, 11 and DT, 12.

³⁰² FV, 15-16.

³⁰³ On Carson's profound uneasiness towards the theological agenda of the ecumenical movement at large, cf. especially *Christian Unity* (1962), *Rome and Reunion* (1969) and *United We Fall* (1975).

³⁰⁴ RCT, 12; the quotation is taken from Küng's *The Living Church* (1963) 32.

Catholic is fundamentally incompatible with what the Gospel claims and teaches, at least when it is read through an Evangelical lens.

2.5.2 The Insistence on the "Semper Eadem" Thesis

Moving beyond the preceding introductory remarks, Carson's work also deserves attention insofar as it typifies the main theological concerns shared by many Evangelicals *vis-à-vis* Roman Catholicism. This all-important theological assumption has to do with the presumptive unchangeability of Roman Catholic dogma, namely the *semper eadem* thesis.

Briefly stated, the argument affirms that in the modern period the Roman Catholic Church, in spite of all appearances, has in no way modified its Tridentine doctrinal position and its anti-Reformation stance. Although he has carefully observed Roman Catholicism in an extraordinary period of transition in the Catholic world such as the last three decades after Vatican II, Carson maintains that even the recent magisterial pronouncements so profoundly shaped by the concern for *aggiornamento* stand, on the contrary, in substantial continuity with the traditional Counter-Reformation Catholicism as epitomised by the Council of Trent. While introducing the new *Catechism* for instance, his pivotal observation concerning the overall character of the document is that "the tone may be friendlier, and the presentation more acceptable to late twentieth-century readers, yet the decrees of Trent are still there",³⁰⁵ particularly as far as transubstantiation, justification by faith and purgatory are concerned.³⁰⁶ In this respect, the Evangelical Carson would be in a strange agreement with the traditionalist Roman Catholic Bossuet in granting scant room for any historical variability in the teaching of the Roman Church.

The *semper eadem* thesis also influences Carson's understanding of complex and fluid phenomena such as the New Catholicism³⁰⁷ and the cross-

³⁰⁵ FV, 12.

³⁰⁶ Cf. *idem*, 13. These are the last three topics dealt with in the more recent book, 146-182.

³⁰⁷ Cf. *The New Catholicism* (1970) and DT, 15-28.

denominational charismatic movement³⁰⁸ which do not fit into a static perception of the contemporary religious world. Yet the awareness of the inner, at times chaotic mobility innervating present-day Roman Catholicism does not cause Carson to revise his interpretative model nor does the extensive reflection on the necessity and even legitimacy of doctrinal development from Newman onwards make a strong impression on him; the reality in Carson's eyes is that, while trying to contain and direct all movements bringing change, the official *magisterium* and the Vatican establishment strongly safeguard their own theological identity without going beyond the Counter-Reformation doctrinal formulations. According to him, insisting on Roman dogmatic unchangeability primarily means that the fundamental terms of the dispute between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals today are still the same as they were in the XVI century. If Rome is *semper eadem*, the controversy cannot but be *semper eadem* as well.

2.5.3 Conclusion

If modern Evangelicalism is essentially a lay movement with strong populist strands, then Evangelical popular theology cannot be neglected in seeking to understand the polyhedric Evangelical perspective on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. Carson's clear-cut assessment cannot be simply dismissed and ignored without taking up the challenge to formulate a revised interpretative approach better suited to the magmatic reality of contemporary Roman Catholicism and, at the same time, loyal to the theological distinctiveness of Evangelicalism itself.

2.6 JOHN STOTT

Because of its theological orientation, historical heritage and sociological connotations, worldwide Evangelicalism does not have an institutional leadership comparable with that of denominational movements or ecclesiastical

³⁰⁸ Carson calls it "Catholic Pentecostalism": cf. DT, 29-38 and FV, 92-106. Cf. also "Rome and the Charismatics" (1976).

bodies. Notwithstanding its strong reluctance, if not allergical reaction, towards hierarchical, elective and other forms of official representation, Evangelicalism does manifest some kind of *de facto* leadership within its ranks. This loosely defined guiding function almost always operates in an informal way, it is sometimes provided by para-church organisations or missionary agencies, and it is often marked by ambiguities and lack of transparency, nonetheless it is an undeniable feature of the Evangelical world.

John Stott is perhaps the best example of a typical Evangelical leader of that kind. He is one of the very few figures within the present-day Evangelical constituency who is usually recognised and widely celebrated as "one of global Evangelicalism's wisest and most discerning leaders".³⁰⁹ Over the last thirty years and from the beginning of the Lausanne movement in particular,³¹⁰ his influence has increasingly expanded far beyond Anglican circles and the English-speaking world in such a way that he can be described as "a sort of unaccredited international ecclesiastical statesman".³¹¹ Though Rector of a London parish, All Souls Church, Langham Place, his real parish has been as wide as the planet. Through his intensive activity as a passionate Bible expositor, persuasive evangelist, fertile writer, respected intellectual and wide-

³⁰⁹ McGrath, "Three Evangelical Voices" (1997) 24. Introductory, though somehow too hagiographical essays on Stott are Catherwood, *Five Evangelical Leaders* (1985), Dudley-Smith, "John Stott" (1991) and Williams, *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (1993). For a biography by a friend and admirer of Stott, cf. Dudley-Smith (1998) and (2001).

³¹⁰ On the history of the Lausanne movement, cf. Padilla, *How Evangelicals Endorsed Social Responsibility* (1985). The major documents produced by movement were recently edited by Stott, *Making Christ Known* (1996). Cf. also his personal reflections on the movement in Stott (1995).

³¹¹ Williams, *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (1993) 342. In this respect, David Edwards has written on Stott: "a loved and trusted leader, teacher and spokesman of the world-wide Evangelical movement - and apart from William Temple the most influential clergyman in the Church of England during the twentieth-century", Edwards-Stott, *Essentials* (1988) 1. Williams defines him as "one of the most positive, creative, and formative leaders of English Anglican evangelicalism during the last two hundred years", *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians*, 351.

ranging churchman, he can be considered as a true giant of the Evangelical camp in the last quarter of the Twentieth-century.³¹²

This being the case, it would be impossible not to find some more or less significant references to Roman Catholicism in the numerous writings of a popular theologian of such a stature. Moreover, apart from presenting his own presumably authoritative opinion on the subject, an assessment of his theological analysis could shed light on a wider trend of thought within Evangelicalism *vis-à-vis* catholicism. In fact, in view of the rather unique traits of his ministry, John Stott could be also expected to epitomize in some way the Evangelical conscience on various issues.

This general assertion, however, must be immediately qualified by a word of caution. As David Edwards has rightly pointed out, "Dr Stott has not so far written extensively under his own name in this field"³¹³ and therefore the researcher who wishes to examine Stott's perspectives on Roman Catholicism is confronted more with fragments of appraisal than with a systematic, comprehensive approach as found earlier in theologians like Gerrit Berkouwer and David Wells. Again, this rather fragmentary treatment mirrors a shared methodology of interaction with differing viewpoints common to Evangelicalism as a whole.

Having said that, in looking at Stott's work throughout his long, fruitful career, it seems appropriate to make a distinction between what appear to be two aspects of his interaction with Roman Catholicism: on the one hand, his works which are marked by an unmistakeably Evangelical confrontational, albeit not polemical, vein and, on the other, those which are the outcome of a sincere commitment to dialogue and cooperation as exemplified in the Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission.³¹⁴

³¹² Stott's vast bibliography, updated to 1995, was edited by Dudley-Smith, *John Stott* (1995).

³¹³ i.e. Catholicism: Edwards-Stott, *Essentials* (1988) 25. A part from the bibliography which will be discussed later, occasional references to catholic doctrine or catholicism in general can be found in *I Believe in Preaching* (1982) 109, *The Message of Thessalonians* (1991) 198 and *The Message of Romans* (1994) 117.

³¹⁴ Hereafter ERCDOM. Cf. Stott-Meeking (1986).

2.6.1 Stott "the Controversialist"

In 1970 Stott published a brilliant book which, as its title indicated, contained a whole theological programme for the decade which had just begun: *Christ the Controversialist*.³¹⁵ In an age which he sees as being characterised by a distinct "dislike of dogmatism", "hatred of controversy", a decline in numbers and influence of Christendom and the emergence of the "spirit of ecumenism" within most denominations,³¹⁶ Stott finds himself unescapably constrained to launch a vibrant "plea for Evangelical Christianity".³¹⁷ Being a convinced apologist with an evangelistic heart, he is ready to defend and to commend the highly ambitious idea that "evangelical" is simply a general category which includes all other foundational marks of true Christianity as "theological",³¹⁸ "biblical",³¹⁹ "original"³²⁰ and "fundamental".³²¹

Against this background, the relationship between catholicism and the kind of Evangelical Christianity he is advocating inevitably, though incidentally, comes to the fore. His reflection on the essential contours of the Evangelical faith gives him the opportunity to deal with catholicism in a comparative way.

In the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council, Stott agrees with the analysis according to which the Roman Church was undergoing a significant process of theological restatement of its doctrine and overall reshaping of its ecclesiastical *ethos*. Observing the scene from an Evangelical point of view, Stott is of the opinion that some strategic inputs in key areas which had been welcomed at the Council and eventually endorsed in the official documents could have been pregnant with unexpected and thrilling developments: "Vatican II has so let Scripture loose in the Church that no man can guess what the final result may be".³²² This "greater biblical awareness"³²³ coupled with "the new

³¹⁵ Hereafter CTC.

³¹⁶ Cf. CTC, 13-26.

³¹⁷ Idem, 27-46.

³¹⁸ Idem, 27-32.

³¹⁹ Idem, 32-33.

³²⁰ Idem, 33-42.

³²¹ Idem, 42-46.

³²² Idem, 23.

encouragement"³²⁴ given to Bible study by the highest authorities of the Church could prove to bear "incalculable consequences".³²⁵ Recalling the language of a much known parable, Stott deems the post-conciliar Rome to have "a biblical yeast at work in her ancient dough, whose full fermentation she may find herself unable to stop".³²⁶

However, these promising signs of a new openness acclaimed by the Evangelical Stott have not swept away the old tridentine pronouncements so unpalatable to him. In fact, in spite of all the positive changes which were taking place and potential further movements within Roman Catholicism, the Council did not explicitly repudiate "any statement or definition of the past" which was formulated as part of the anti-protestant controversy of the XVI century. In its apparent unchangeability, the *semper eadem* was still an impressive reality in coming to terms with contemporary catholicism. Earlier in the mid-Sixties, Stott had already attacked some of Rome's traditional teaching like the practice of auricular confession of sins in private to a priest arguing that it "is neither recognised nor recommended in Scripture".³²⁷

Moreover, Stott notices that the progressive elements in the *magisterium* of Vatican II had been supplemented by Pope Paul VI with the totally reactionary "Credo of the People of God" in June 1968. In the latter, "entirely unbiblical traditions" regarding the Virgin Mary, the Pope and the Mass were simply and distressingly reiterated.³²⁸ Before such unambiguous and unreformed statements of the "Credo", Stott's protestant conscience is deeply "scandalized".³²⁹ This persistent "cherishing of traditions which are not in the

³²³ Idem, 22.

³²⁴ Idem, 79.

³²⁵ Ibidem.

³²⁶ CTC 80.

³²⁷ Quoted from John Stott, *Confess Your Sins* (Evangelical Fellowship in the Anglican Communion, 1964) by Edwards-Stott, *Essentials* (1988) 23.

³²⁸ CTC 25. Stott analyses the content of the "Credo" on pp. 23-25. On the Catholic doctrine of the Mass, cf. Stott, *The Cross of Christ* (1986) 264-273. In spite of the new emphases underlined at Vatican II, Stott considers the whole teaching on the Mass still so entrenched in a tridentine framework and therefore "still unacceptable" (266).

³²⁹ Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 30.

Bible" as found in Roman catholicism is indeed the "stubborn obstacle"³³⁰ to the process of union between Churches.

But, in Stott's opinion, even within the *corpus* of Vatican II's teaching, the new emphases are side by side with the old doctrinal tenets and, occasionally, the two are "mutually contradictory".³³¹ Following this line of evaluation, the Council is seen as having "endorsed opinions which oppose, contradict and exclude each other"³³² giving clear evidence of "painful inner tensions"³³³ within the Church, elsewhere referred to as an "unprecedented disarray"³³⁴ or "confused condition".³³⁵ Noting this kind of doctrinal oscillation between two irreconcilable ways of theologizing, Stott believes that the unstable situation will demand the definitive prevailing of one side at the expense of the other. So to speak, "the Roman Church cannot forever sit on the fence".³³⁶

Incidentally, here again the basic adequacy of the Evangelical epistemological approach to catholicism is at issue. As already pointed out in surveying Wells' reading of Vatican II, in Stott too a typically protestant *aut-aut* framework of thought is operating in his understanding of what was going on in those turbulent post-conciliar years.³³⁷ In spite of his Anglican upbringing so traditionally dominated with the quest of a *via media*, the "either-or" mindset heavily conditions, if not utterly determines, his (lack of) apprehension of the complex dynamics operating within the catholic citadel. This simple application of a protestant-oriented epistemology to a multifaceted phenomenon like Roman Catholicism which surely defies such a stringent exclusivist logic, negatively impinges on the possibility to understand how and why Roman Catholicism

³³⁰ Stott, *Life in Christ* (1991) 58.

³³¹ CTC, 82. Stott thinks of *Dei Verbum* in particular.

³³² Stott, "Foreword" (1972) 8. Interestingly, these words are written as part of a "foreword" to David Wells' book on Vatican II whose basic thesis is that the Council is the outcome of an unsettled process of juxtaposition of diverging theologies. For more details, cf. the section on David Wells.

³³³ CTC 23.

³³⁴ Stott, "Foreword" (1972) 8.

³³⁵ Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 30.

³³⁶ CTC, 81.

itself functions. The question as to whether such a research tool is epistemologically appropriate in assessing the catholic *et-et* cognitive procedure in all its theological, historical and cultural aspects, remains in all its force and will be addressed in a further stage of the thesis.

However, leaving aside for the moment these important considerations, Stott's sincere, though rather undiplomatic wish is that the Roman Church might eventually experience "a thoroughgoing biblical reformation".³³⁸ This is the only truly necessary precondition towards the realisation of some kind of Christian unity.³³⁹ In fact, whatever the present state of ecumenical relationships between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals and their foreseeable prospects, "reunion with Rome is inconceivable without the reformation of Rome".³⁴⁰ Thus, even participation of Evangelicals in a Roman Catholic mass would be completely precluded "until the doctrinal stance of the church has been officially reformed".³⁴¹ In evoking such an ambitious (and perhaps too naïve) desire, Stott gives some glimpses as to what this reforming process would entail, both negatively and positively.

Firstly, the "reformation of Rome" would imply a deconstructive work on the Roman Catholic doctrinal apparatus with the abandoning of some of its consolidated features which Evangelicals consider biblically spurious if not totally unwarranted. Writing at the beginning of the Eighties, he argues that "if the Church of Rome were to have the courage to renounce unbiblical traditions (*e.g.* its dogmas about the immaculate conception and bodily assumption of the Virgin Mary), immediate progress would be made towards agreement under the Word of God".³⁴² Unfortunately, apart from the example given, Stott does not spell out in detail what he would classify as "unbiblical traditions". All he offers

³³⁷ Even the chapters of *Ctc* are indicative of this *aut-aut* approach: "Religion: natural or supernatural?", "Authority: tradition or scripture?", "Scripture: end or means?", "Salvation: merit or mercy?"

³³⁸ *CTC*, 23.

³³⁹ Cf. *CTC*, 32: "Evangelicals ... regard as the only possible road to the reunion of churches the road of biblical reformation".

³⁴⁰ Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 30.

³⁴¹ *Idem*, 31.

³⁴² Stott, *The Bible* (1982) 49.

the reader in his discourse are only fragments of analysis and provisional *cahiers de doléance* without any solid theological argumentation.

Secondly, the reforming programme in Stott's mind contemplates a more reconstructive phase based on the conviction that "the doctrines of scriptural supremacy and free justification have preeminence" within the whole counsel of God.³⁴³ Recalling the Vatican II's teaching on the "hierarchy of truths", Stott argues that the Roman Catholic Church should, in light of that paramount principle, thoroughly rethink her bibliology and soteriology in terms of the theological understanding of the Reformation and fully acknowledge their absolutely foundational importance for the Christian faith. Then again, catholicism should engage in the painful but beneficial process of recasting his whole doctrinal system accordingly to the newly reached doctrinal balance.

2.6.2 Stott the Convener and Drafter of ERCDOM

In his understanding of the identity of the Evangelical faith and its relationship to Roman Catholicism, Stott has always borne in mind that the deep differences and on-going theological controversies between the two traditions were not sufficient reasons for rejecting the possibility of genuine dialogue.³⁴⁴ A "plea for evangelical Christianity" did not exclude an openness to a dialoguing attitude but, on the contrary, urgently demanded it. In this respect, Stott holds that "the proper activity of professing Christians who disagree with one another is neither to ignore, nor to conceal, nor even to minimize their differences, but to debate them".³⁴⁵ The dialogue which is envisaged by Stott would be "candid and serious",³⁴⁶ possibly and preferably based on "joint Bible study"³⁴⁷ and with the

³⁴³ Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 30.

³⁴⁴ Stott strongly advocates the need for dialogue also in a missionary context. Cf. his *Christian Mission in the Modern World* (1975).

³⁴⁵ CTC, 22. However, Edwards points out that this dialoguing attitude did not belong to the young Stott: "in 1964 John Stott saw no need to enter into any real dialogue with Roman Catholics or with Catholic-minded fellow-Anglicans": Edwards-Stott, *Essentials*, 23. That close disposition was somehow paralleled by Stott's initial criticism towards the charismatic movement.

³⁴⁶ *Essentials*, 25.

³⁴⁷ Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 31. Here again Stott speaks of "candid dialogue with Roman Catholics".

qualifying premise that the participants involved should be "under an obligation first to listen in order to understand".³⁴⁸

What Stott has briefly sketched in various writings and in several occasions, he has also tried to implement in the course of his ministry. He is a man who "closely intertwines reflection and action"³⁴⁹ always striving to combine theory and practice, lofty projects and viable programmes, scholarly work and social, ethical, missionary concerns.

Against this background, it should not be surprising to find John Stott enthusiastically taking part and playing a leading role in a series of meetings between *ad hoc* international commissions named by the two camps. In fact, between 1977 and 1984 representative groups of Evangelicals and Roman Catholics met on three occasions for intensive dialogue on mission,³⁵⁰ focussing the debate on the meaning of such words as "mission", "salvation", "conversion" and the possibilities of common witness.³⁵¹ It is no chance that Stott significantly contributed to draft the Report of ERCDOM and eventually edited the proceedings together with Basil Meeking.

ERCDOM was somehow the natural outcome of the particular historical phase which both Roman Catholic and Evangelical constituencies were experiencing, though in a rather parallel way, in the early Seventies. On the one hand, the Second Vatican Council with the decree *Ad Gentes* followed and integrated by Paul VI's apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* in 1975 had put mission back on the Roman Catholic agenda. On the other, the Evangelical International Congress on World Evangelization which took place in Lausanne in 1974 had fully confirmed the traditional Evangelical emphasis on mission and sanctioned it in the *Lausanne Covenant*. Against the background of the recovery

³⁴⁸ Stott, "Foreword" (1972) 7.

³⁴⁹ Williams, *Handbook of Evangelical Theologians* (1993) 342.

³⁵⁰ The list of the participants and the places where they met is given in ERCDOM, 93-94. The Evangelical participants were not "official representatives of any international body" while the catholic ones were named by the Vatican Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity. Cf. ERCDOM, 7-8. The selecting criteria and process of the Evangelical group are in themselves a practical example of the way in which international leadership operates within Evangelicalism. Cf. the Introduction to this section: 2.6, 97-99.

³⁵¹ Cf. Stott, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1977) 31.

of the missionary effort promoted at the Lausanne Congress, one of the papers read at the meeting dealt specifically with the attempt to analyse the trends in the post-Vatican II Roman Church of the time in order to explore their significance for Evangelicals willing to re-engage in mission³⁵². A brief reference to some features found in the Second Vatican Council, i.e. the reinterpretation of dogma according to the criterion of *aggiornamento*, the strong emphasis on Scripture, the apparent awakening of religious experience, the tendency towards decentralisation of authority, is taken as an encouragement and a challenge for all missionary minded Evangelicals. After outlining these significant changes in the scenario, the paper ends with an indication of some key areas of common interest for Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. In-depth Bible study at grassroots level, sustained theological dialogue, participation of Roman Catholic believers in inter-denominational outreaches, are some of these activities which are considered important and possible in the new ecumenical context of the early Seventies. The Lausanne reflection argues that the new face of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism challenges Evangelicals to revise their "prejudiced and antiquated caricatures of Roman Catholics"³⁵³ and calls for a new phase in inter-confessional relationships.

Thus, this common concentration of attention and efforts on evangelism provided the shared motivation and formed the indispensable "common ground"³⁵⁴ for promoting a comprehensive exchange of theological views and for fostering serious bilateral discussions on this burning issue.³⁵⁵ Both Evangelical and Roman Catholic representatives were aware that the above mentioned documents "supplied some evidence of a growing convergence" in the respective understandings of the missionary task,³⁵⁶ though they recognised the "long-standing tensions" which existed between them on the field and in the practice of missionary endeavour.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Atallah (1975) 872-882.

³⁵³ Idem, 881.

³⁵⁴ ERCDOM, 10.

³⁵⁵ For the historical background of the dialogue, cf. ERCDOM, 9-10.

³⁵⁶ ERCDOM, 29.

³⁵⁷ Idem, 30.

In line with these rather limited presuppositions and realistic objectives, the purpose of ERCDOM was not to explore the possibility of organic unity nor was it animated by the desire to arrive at an agreed formal statement between the two delegations. Instead, it resolved to be "a faithful record of the ideas shared"³⁵⁸ in which the brief exposition of both positions was followed by the honest indication of areas of disagreement as well as points of agreement.³⁵⁹ In a descriptive outlook, the Report is divided into seven sections which summarize the development and the content of the dialogue.

After an important introductory chapter on "Revelation and Authority",³⁶⁰ ERCDOM goes on to touch on "The Nature of Mission",³⁶¹ "The Gospel of Salvation",³⁶² "Our Response in the Holy Spirit to the Gospel",³⁶³ "The Church and the Gospel",³⁶⁴ "The Gospel and Culture",³⁶⁵ while concluding with a deductive and practical application of the issues debated on "The Possibilities of Common Witness".³⁶⁶

In the course of the discussion the participants came across areas of consensus on the inseparability of "repentance and faith, conversion and baptism, regeneration and incorporation into the Christian community",³⁶⁷ as well as on "certain convictions about the Church".³⁶⁸ On the whole, ERCDOM testifies to the reality that "deep truths unite" Evangelicals and Roman Catholics³⁶⁹ and that on certain fundamental doctrines their understanding is "identical or very similar"³⁷⁰ to the point of admitting that the walls of the separation "do not reach heaven".³⁷¹ This is however only one side of the coin.

³⁵⁸ Idem, 11.

³⁵⁹ Cf. idem, 81.

³⁶⁰ Idem, 14-26.

³⁶¹ Idem, 29-35.

³⁶² Idem, 39-52.

³⁶³ Idem, 55-62.

³⁶⁴ Idem, 65-69.

³⁶⁵ Idem, 73-78.

³⁶⁶ Idem, 81-92.

³⁶⁷ Idem, 57-60.

³⁶⁸ Idem, 65-69.

³⁶⁹ Idem, 82-83.

³⁷⁰ Idem, 88.

³⁷¹ Idem, 81.

ERCDOM also clearly shows that "divisions continue"³⁷² and that they are rooted in "real and important convictions"³⁷³ that the two counterparts wholeheartedly hold as essential elements of their doctrinal identity. The Report provides a significant list of areas of disagreement on several issues and in various degrees. Firstly, the two delegations put a different "emphasis" on the role of the believing community and the individual believer in the task of biblical interpretation³⁷⁴ and on the understanding of the soteriological significance of the work of Christ.³⁷⁵ Moreover, there is the recognition that profound divergences are apparent in the doctrine of sin whereby Evangelicals are more pessimistic stressing the concept of "total depravity" while Roman Catholics are more optimistic speaking of sin in terms of "injury" and "disorder".³⁷⁶ Consequently, the meaning of the term grace is articulated "somewhat differently".³⁷⁷ Finally, an appendix to the proceedings is dedicated to Mariology giving Evangelicals an occasion to express all their "uneasiness" with a "certainly ambiguous and probably misleading" vocabulary used by Roman Catholics in relation to Mary.³⁷⁸

In line with the outcome of the dialogue, both commissions acknowledge the existence of the possibility of "common witness", especially in the work of Bible translation and publishing, the use of media, community service, social thought and action.³⁷⁹

³⁷² ERCDOM, 82.

³⁷³ Idem, 83.

³⁷⁴ Idem, 23.

³⁷⁵ In this respect, Evangelicals stress the word "substitution", whereas catholics prefer the word "solidarity". Cf. idem, 43. On the basis of this divergence, the meaning of the word "gospel" can change considerably (ibidem).

³⁷⁶ Idem, 40. References to Evangelicals as more "pessimistic" and catholics as more "optimistic" are found elsewhere in the Report, 5 and 61-62. Somewhat analogously, Evangelicals are referred to as underlining "discontinuity" whereas catholics focussing on "continuity" between man redeemed and man unredeemed, 73.

³⁷⁷ Idem, 60.

³⁷⁸ Idem, 52.

³⁷⁹ This possibility envisaged by ERCDOM has been criticised by Gibson, "Evangelicals and Roman Catholics" (1986) and Davies, "ERCDOM and ARCIC II" (1987).

On the whole, there is a striking similarity between some of Stott's concerns as presented earlier in the section and some interesting features of ERCDOM. For instance, the parallelism is evident when Evangelicals wonder whether the *aggiornamento* prompted and pursued by Vatican II can be thought of as being an act of reform in terms of the protestant understanding of the word,³⁸⁰ or again when the Report affirms that "indiscriminate approaches to common sacramental worship" are to be strongly discouraged.³⁸¹ Stott's direct contribution is clearly perceivable in these statements which mirror some of his dearest personal views.

2.6.3 Conclusion

John Stott has not been afraid to assume the role of a bold though sensible controversialist in his life-long interaction with Roman Catholicism. In spite of the comprehensiveness of his being after all an Evangelical *anglican*, he has not refused to take ^{A STAND} ~~such~~ even at the risk of being associated with those animated by merely polemical attitudes. Meanwhile, he has faced dialogue with catholics out of a genuine concern to overcome, wherever and whenever possible, misunderstandings and preconceptions and to promote the ability to debate vigorously but within a context of mutual respect. His openness to dialogue is an example for Evangelicals which should be capitalised and invested upon.

Unfortunately, as already indicated, much of his theological analysis and reflection on Catholicism is rather episodic and therefore in the end of limited use in the task of shaping a coherent, integrated and penetrating Evangelical approach to Roman Catholicism.

³⁸⁰ ERCDOM, 25.

³⁸¹ Idem, 87.

CHAPTER THREE

THE CONTRIBUTION OF THE WORLD EVANGELICAL FELLOWSHIP IN THE SHAPING OF AN EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVE ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM

A part from surveying the works of single theologians and authors, the question of how the Evangelical movement has perceived and related to Roman Catholicism after the Second Vatican Council cannot escape taking into account what has been produced and achieved under the auspices of the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF).¹ Evangelical theology cannot be reduced to the voices of individual scholars as much as its evaluation of Roman Catholicism cannot be drawn from single sources only.

Though refusing to be subsumed into a single ecclesiastical structure or a universal denominational body, the movement has its own widespread network which endeavours to promote partnership within its ranks. In this respect, WEF is the only institutional subject which can be considered as the world-wide "umbrella body for evangelicals".² Membership is formed by a growing number of national alliances or fellowships (at the moment, there are 112) which bring into association several local churches, Christian organisations and individuals representing some 150 million Evangelicals all over the globe. Its current mission statement affirms that WEF exists "to establish and help regional and national Evangelical alliances empower and mobilise local churches and Christian organisations to disciple the nations for Christ".³

In its external affairs, WEF functions as the Evangelical counterpoint to the World Council of Churches (WCC) as well as being the most representative Evangelical interlocutor as far as international relationships between religious bodies are concerned. Its unique aggregating ability within the highly fragmented Evangelical world and its derived institutional role are sufficient reasons to reflect on

¹ According to the WEF website, www.worldevangelical.org, the denomination of WEF has been changed in World Evangelical Alliance (WEA) from January 2002.

² Vencer (1996) 61.

WEF's contribution to the forging of an Evangelical perspective on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism.

3.1 ROMAN CATHOLICISM IN WEF'S AGENDA SINCE ITS FOUNDATION

The century and a half long history of WEF has been depicted using the image of a "dream" which eventually, though laboriously, became reality.⁴ WEF dates back to August 1846 when the World Evangelical Alliance was founded in England. On that occasion, nearly 1,000 delegates from various countries met to create a fellowship which would represent Evangelical unity and foster co-operation amongst Evangelicals. In spite of its declared purpose to pursue a world-wide scope, the newly-founded Alliance failed to carry out this ambitious project. The vision for an Evangelical body transcending national and denominational frontiers was present from its inception but some indispensable features - such as a global network of contacts, a feasible working strategy and a truly representative role - were simply lacking. The Alliance, as conceived by its founders, was to become an authentic international organisation only in the years immediately following the Second World War.

In continuity with the limited experience of the Alliance and with the aim of strengthening visible ties within the Evangelical movement, the possibility of promoting a new initiative in that direction was informally explored in the late Forties. The result of the intensive preparatory work⁵ was the convening of an international consultation held in Woudschoten (The Netherlands) in August 1951. It was there that WEF in its present form came into existence and the enthusiasm generated by that first conference was to become a significant spring-board for its future activity.

³ The revised version of the statement (also called "The Singapore Covenant") was drafted and adopted in 1994. The text can be found as an appendix in Fuller (1997) 194-195.

⁴ For detailed and sympathetic histories of WEF, cf. Howard (1986 and 1989 which is a shorter version of the previous book) and Fuller (1997). A select bibliography on WEF is in Fuller (1997) 197-204. On the history of WEF's Theological Commission, cf. Nicholls (2002).

⁵ Elwin Wright and Paul Rees, the two chief promoters, made a twenty-six nation visit to meet leaders and to spread the vision of the future WEF.

Taking into account that in 1948 the World Council of Churches had been launched in Amsterdam, it is interesting to notice that the post-war years witnessed a renewed search for inter-denominational dialogue and partnership even in Evangelical circles.

In those initial stages, WEF's chief aim was to spur its members to liase with one another, to consolidate Evangelical self-awareness of unity in diversity and to encourage the penetration of its vision into Evangelical Churches and para-church organisations at large. As might have been expected from a sociological point of view, internal concerns took precedence over external objectives. In the light of the need for WEF to cement its own frail walls, Roman Catholicism, both theologically and institutionally, played a rather marginal role in its spectrum of interests for at least its first two decades of activity.

Potentially, the Roman Catholic Church had always been recognised as a primary counterpart in the religious scene with which WEF would have to come to terms with sooner or later, both at local and international level. However, for practical reasons, priority was given to other issues of paramount importance which were on the Evangelical agenda at that juncture. In fact, as part of a new phase in the contemporary history of Evangelicalism coinciding with the emergence of the Lausanne movement, in the early Seventies, WEF was beginning to reflect on the relationship between evangelism and social action and on contextualization in mission and theology.⁶

In spite of WEF's contingent circumstances, the conviction shared by its leaders was that the Roman Church could not be ignored world-wide and that the challenges faced in regional contexts could not be evaded too. In this respect, several national alliances, especially those operating in Latin countries, had to confront Roman Catholicism and related to it out of sheer necessity. For these alliances, the reflection on their relationship with Rome did mean defining the contours of their Evangelical identity vis-à-vis the major religious institution in many Southern European and South American countries. In these situations, the distinction between internal and external plans of action tended to blur, if not to disappear.

The unavoidable challenges posed by regional problems did not impact WEF on an international level until 1978 when Roman Catholicism became a significant issue, and a highly controversial one. The turning point which upgraded the importance of Roman Catholicism within WEF's agenda took place during the

⁶ On these aspects of WEF's reflection and action, cf. Webber (1986) 239-257.

Seventh General Assembly which was held in Hoddesdon (UK).⁷ The main focus of the Assembly was to have been constitutional revisions and the setting-up of viable strategies for the Eighties. On that occasion, quite unexpectedly, the presence of two catholic observers (Mr Ralph Martin and M^r Basil Meeking) and the greetings they brought from the platform incensed some of the delegates and caused a sudden change in the course of the meeting. Heated discussion followed with regard to the precise significance of the participation of the two catholic observers. Two interpretations polarised the debate. For the protesters, it implied a clear stamp of approval of the post-Vatican II Roman Church which had neither been agreed nor voted by WEF constituency. For WEF Executive Council, instead, it was a useful opportunity to present the Evangelical identity to respected catholic representatives without attaching any theological overtones to the invitation.

In the aftermath of the 1978 Assembly, as part of the efforts to forestall the real danger of a painful disruption over the matter, the Theological Commission of WEF selected and appointed a 17 member Task Force whose mandate was to elaborate an Evangelical theological analysis of Roman Catholicism and indicate the kind of relationship WEF should pursue with it. Theologians from Latin countries were also included in the group so as to demonstrate the WEF's willingness to take seriously the contribution of Latin national alliances in shaping those guidelines.⁸ The mandate given to the Task Force in 1980 was "to study afresh different aspects of Roman Catholic theology and practice as they relate to biblical principles and the evangelical community".⁹ It was envisaged that all member bodies of the Fellowship would endorse the final document.

It took six years for the commission chaired by Paul Schrotenboer to draft an in-depth working document and in 1986 it was presented and eventually approved at the Eighth General Assembly of WEF held in Singapore.¹⁰ So, in the end, more in response to contingent difficulties than as a result of strategic planning, WEF produced its own Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism.¹¹ As Schrotenboer himself affirms, "the document was designed specifically for consolidation and

⁷ On this important Assembly, see in particular Howard (1986) 130-136. Cf. also Fuller (1996) 126-127.

⁸ The list of contributors is provided by Schrotenboer (1987) 13-14.

⁹ Cf. the Introduction to WEF (1986) 344.

¹⁰ The different stages of the drafting of the document are recorded by Schrotenboer (1987) 7-12.

¹¹ The text has also been published in book form by Schrotenboer (1987).

healing among Evangelicals concerning the Church of Rome".¹² One of its outcomes was in fact "a heightened sense of evangelical self-identity" within WEF.¹³

Perhaps, it is interesting to note that 1986 also saw the publication of the report of the *The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission 1977-1984*, edited by John Stott and Basil Meeking.¹⁴ After decades, if not centuries, of Evangelical anti-Catholic polemics, two significant attempts to inaugurate a new phase in the Evangelical apprehension of Roman Catholicism saw the light in the same period of time. These documents were not academic theological treatises nor were they particularly innovative in their basic approach to Roman Catholicism. What they did bear witness to was the genuine effort to take into account the inner dynamics and variety within post-conciliar Catholicism while trying to leave aside the kind of monolithic, totally un-nuanced, over-simplistic view which had characterised much of the previous Evangelical critique. Added to that, both the Perspective and the Dialogue pointed to the need to confront Roman Catholicism giving precedence to theology as the controlling-principle of evaluation, so as to reduce the influence of secondary factors, such as a kind of "minority complex", which had often been evident in preceding Evangelical appraisals.

Apart from its own merits which will be discussed later, the Perspective was also the first sign of a new attention on the part of WEF towards the wider ecumenical movement. After 1986, the same WEF Task Force which had worked on Roman Catholicism enlarged its scope and produced two short studies written as preliminary evaluations of some ecumenical key-texts. In doing so, WEF provided worthy Evangelical responses to the 1982 Lima document *Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry*¹⁵ and to the 1992 WCC document *Confessing the One Faith*.¹⁶ It is only since the Eighties that WEF has become more involved in external relationships and the turning-point in this on-going process was again the question of Roman Catholicism.

There is yet another interesting development within WEF which can be traced back to the controversy over Roman Catholicism at the 1978 Assembly. Since then, Roman Catholicism has finally been recognised as belonging to its core interests.

¹² Schrottenboer (1987) 10.

¹³ Idem, 11.

¹⁴ On this dialogue, see the section on John Stott: 2.6.2, 104-109.

¹⁵ Schrottenboer (1989).

¹⁶ Schrottenboer (1994).

The symposia sponsored by WEF from 1978 onwards have reflected this new awareness by including papers directly or indirectly related to trends and themes within catholic theology.¹⁷ Moreover, WEF's theological journal, the *Evangelical Review of Theology*, has in recent years hosted a few articles written by catholic authors,¹⁸ without doubt a further opening which should be understood as stemming from this process within the Fellowship.

Retrospectively then, it would not be completely unwarranted to attribute some kind of providential meaning to the 1978 heated debates on WEF's dealings with Roman Catholicism. The situation which gave rise to the contrast between delegates might seem an over-reaction to a polite public relations exercise, that is, the invitation extended to two catholic representatives to attend a WEF meeting. Certainly, some Evangelical participants might have been disturbed by the implications of the participation of the catholic guests, if there were any. It was felt that the mere presence of Mr Martin and M^r Meeking could be perceived as a symbolic pointer towards a possible shift in the Evangelical evaluation of Roman Catholicism which had not been previously agreed nor was on the agenda. If anything though, the episode at least forced WEF to think through its stance towards Roman Catholicism and provided the opportunity to make significant steps in proposing an Evangelical analysis of it capable of receiving a general consensus within WEF's constituency. The challenge of meeting internal needs had been fruitful also in terms of furthering the wider aims of the Fellowship.

3.2 THE 1986 WEF'S *PERSPECTIVE* ON ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The approved text of the *Perspective* consists of nine chapters which cover as many areas of particular importance to Evangelicals in dealing with Roman Catholicism. In the Preamble, it is specified that Evangelicals approach the task from a confessional basis, a strong "commitment to the truth", that is the reaffirmation of the fundamental doctrines expressed by the Reformers with the *sola Scriptura*, *solo Christo*, *sola gratia*, *sola fide* and *solī Deo gloria*.¹⁹ These "treasures of the Gospel", these "cardinal truths of the historic apostolic faith"²⁰ make it possible for WEF in

¹⁷ e.g. Nuñez (1984), Runia (1992) and Vandervelde (1995). There are also occasional references to Roman Catholicism in Nicholls (1994).

¹⁸ e.g. Sandidge (1989), Mantovani (1994) and Neuhaus (1997).

¹⁹ WEF (1986) 343 and (1987) 93.

²⁰ WEF (1987) 93.

particular and Evangelicals in general to enter into "candid and fearless contact with the Church of Rome".²¹ The strong reformed flavour of the document has been noted by Cardinal Edward Cassidy too who has recently argued that the text makes "several strong references to the thought of John Calvin when illustrating apparent differences between evangelicals and catholics on issues such as the authority of Scripture and 'sacramentalism' ".²²

In the first section on "Relation to other Churches", the document underlines the historical fact that, wherever Roman Catholicism has been the dominant religion and the Roman Church has held strong connections with the civil government, Evangelicals have instead suffered oppression and marginalisation. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council has significantly modified the catholic position on religious freedom, yet the practice of discrimination towards minorities is still a real temptation and a concrete possibility where Roman Catholicism is the majority religion. Moreover, in its dealings with other Churches, Rome may have changed its ecumenical tactics - "the former hard line"²³ - but its more long-term strategy is still the invitation to reunion under its authority: in this respect, even in Vatican II texts "the call to Rome is no longer in imperial tones, but it is unmistakably present".²⁴ The theological assumptions behind such an offer are completely unacceptable to present-day Evangelicals just as they were unpalatable to the Reformers of the Sixteenth century. If "the Roman Catholic self-identity" is still replete with tridentine substance, then separation from Rome is still the only viable option for Evangelicals.

On Mariology, the Perspective affirms that this doctrine, together with the devotional practices associated to it in different parts of the world, is a "major point of controversy between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals",²⁵ or even more forcefully, "a formidable barrier" between them.²⁶ According to WEF's Task Force, Rome's Marian dogmas, notwithstanding the magisterial intentions not to endorse syncretistic forms of popular religiosity, are nevertheless properly questionable on theological grounds. In fact, they "cast a shadow upon the sufficiency of the

²¹ WEF (1986) 344.

²² Cassidy (1997) 27.

²³ WEF (1986) 348.

²⁴ Ibidem. The Vatican II documents quoted are UR 3-4, LG 12.14.22.

²⁵ Idem, 351.

²⁶ Idem, 356.

intercession of Jesus Christ, lack all support from Scripture and detract from the worship which Christ alone deserves".²⁷

The section on the "Authority in the Church" again stresses the inevitability of the "conflict" over the issue on the role of tradition, both historical and the "living voice" of the magisterium, in the life of the Church. The document welcomes the recent "signs of renewed interest in the Bible in Roman Catholic circles"²⁸ as primarily attested in *Dei Verbum*. This appreciable openness to Scripture in present-day Roman Catholicism stands in "contrast with Trent and Vatican I"²⁹ but is still far away from the protestant principle of *sola Scriptura*. The Roman Church attributes to the ecclesiastical institution "a power which according to official teaching is subordinate to Scripture, but which in practice is superior to it in the final instance".³⁰

The Vatican doctrine on "The Papacy and Infallibility" is the issue dealt with in the fifth section of the *Perspective*. This is also "an immense obstacle to Christian unity".³¹ Despite various attempts to suggest some kind of qualified and mitigated interpretations of the Vatican I texts on the papal *ex cathedra* pronouncements, the WEF document argues that "Scripture leaves no room for mere corrections"³² on the doctrine of the papacy. No genuine renewal within Roman Catholicism can leave untouched the traditional understanding and practice of the papacy. A true reformation would require a complete re-thinking of the role of the papacy.

Another crucial section of the document tackles the old controversial area of "Justification by Faith Alone". After a brief survey of the history of the polemics between Protestants and Roman Catholics, WEF's Task Force is aware, on the one hand, of the ongoing Roman Catholic-Lutheran discussions on the subject as well as of the nuanced views expressed by theologians like Hans Küng. On the other hand, the Vatican II texts contain "only oblique references to it"³³ indicating that no new ground has been broken. This being the case, if it is fair to say that the Roman Catholic reference point on justification by faith is still Trent, then this doctrine

²⁷ Idem, 356-357. On Mariology, cf. the appendix entitled "John Paul II and Mary" in Schrotenboer (1987) 87-93.

²⁸ WEF (1986) 358.

²⁹ Idem, 360.

³⁰ Ibidem.

³¹ Idem, 364.

³² Ibidem.

³³ WEF (1987) 84.

continues to be "a major barrier between heirs of the Reformation and Roman Catholicism".³⁴

In "Sacramentalism and the Eucharist", there is the recognition of the "spectacular changes"³⁵ which have taken place in catholic liturgical practices. Yet, on the causal aspect of the Roman Catholic understanding of the sacraments, no evangelically significant revision has occurred. The objective efficacy attributed to the sacraments is seen in the *Perspective* as "an intolerable addition to the finished work of Jesus Christ".³⁶ Even more than that, as far as the sacraments are concerned, nothing less than a "conflict between two opposing views of the Christian faith" is at stake.³⁷

The final section covers "The Mission of the Church" and it voices concern for "a dangerous underestimation of the sinfulness of natural man" in Roman Catholic missiology and for "an incipient unbiblical universalism in Rome's view" *vis-à-vis* the alleged soteriological value of other religions.³⁸ Karl Rahner's category of "anonymous Christianity" and Raymond Panikkar's "unknown Christ" are found disturbing in that they are thought as "clearly negate the finality of Jesus Christ".³⁹ The same highly skeptical attitude is also reserved for some expressions like "Christ incognito", "latent kingdom" and "incipient faith" which are not uncommon in catholic missiological writing.⁴⁰

After such a clear-cut evaluation of the perceived Roman Catholic position, the concluding observations simply reiterate and summarise what has been previously stated. As already mentioned, the mandate given to the Task Force was to delineate the kind of relationship that Evangelicals and Roman Catholics should seek to establish in the contemporary religious world scene. In light of the poignant analysis suggested in the *Perspective*, both fellowship and cooperation between them are seriously impeded because of "unsurmountable" obstacles. Christian unity, though "highly desirable", ought not to come about "at the expense of the fundamental evangelical truths" that have been affirmed in the document.⁴¹ As for

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ Idem, 86.

³⁶ Idem, 88.

³⁷ Ibidem.

³⁸ Idem, 92.

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Idem, 93.

⁴¹ Ibidem.

Evangelicals, this kind of critical distance will be fully sustainable until a "reformation according to the Word of God" takes place in the Church of Rome.⁴² Taking into account the apparently solid catholic theological framework and the present trend followed by the Vatican hierarchy, the prospect of such a reformation is not in view. However, the possibility that "the biblical movement, the charismatic movement and the base communities" will bring about some form of basic change within Roman Catholicism as a whole should not be ruled out.⁴³

Around this long, bold statement, Evangelical consensus was gathered together and mutual trust within WEF members restored. Beyond this, the work carried out by the Task Force was not the end of the matter but the beginning of a process not clearly envisaged when it had been appointed.

From 1986 onwards, the *Perspective* circulated not only within the WEF constituency but was also sent to the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity as a testimony of a piece of contemporary Evangelical approach to Roman Catholicism. The document had been thought as a response to internal needs but it became an occasion for bilateral dialogue and theological discussion too. Four years after its release, the Council issued a series of "Reflections"⁴⁴ as a preliminary, unofficial and sketched reaction to the statement, with a view to furthering the debate. On the whole, while appreciating the efforts made and wishing to pursue the dialogue, two main critical considerations were formulated on the WEF text, the first being the apparent theological naiveté, in the Evangelical analysis and the second being a demonstration of a scanty ecumenical sensitivity in the interpretation and presentation of the issues at stake.

In the Pontifical Council's view, the agenda set out by the Task Force is basically inadequate and its attempt to examine a vast range of controversial doctrinal topics actually leads it to avoid "the fundamental issues" between Roman Catholics and Evangelicals. A candid and frank dialogue should aim to investigate "the root of the problems" around which the whole differentiation arises.⁴⁵ The *Perspective* is thought of as lacking theological depth and the "Reflections" make clear proposals with regard to a more adequate agenda for the dialogue. In fact, "the

⁴² Ibidem.

⁴³ Idem, 90.

⁴⁴ Pontifical Consilium Ad Christianorum Unitatem Fovendam (1990). The covering letter is signed by Kevin McDonald.

⁴⁵ Idem, 2-3.

central issues can be reduced to two broad areas of concern: (1) the question of Scripture and Tradition ...; (2) the question of the Church as communion and as sacrament ...".⁴⁶ The Council suggested that future consultations should focus on these primary matters rather than giving time to secondary issues. The "Reflections" end with a somewhat humorous comment that "the Catholic Church is a much more complex animal than the paper seems ready to acknowledge".⁴⁷

The other weakness identified by the Pontifical Council is related to area of the ethos of ecumenical relationships as manifested by the WEF Task Force. According to the "Reflections", the "methodologies for ecumenical dialogue and frameworks of rapprochement" which are becoming the lowest common denominator in ecumenical circles are seldom referred to in the *Perspective*, let alone an attempt to practice them. What really abounds is instead "the language of good old-fashioned Protestant-Catholic polemics" which is considered sterile and useless, an expression of suspicion and distrust.⁴⁸ Implied in the Council's polite but firm rebuke was the need for Evangelicals to abandon their polemical stance and preference for monologues and accept the modality of present-day ecumenical relationships which are conceived to be the only constructive way of engaging in dialogue.

3.3 THE ONGOING DIALOGUE BETWEEN WEF AND THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN UNITY

The statement issued by the Task Force had unexpected results with regards to the opportunities for dialogue it opened up. After the written reaction of the Pontifical Council, long term plans for bilateral discussion were beginning to be prepared. This process led immediately to two brief meetings between representatives of the respective institutions in 1988 in Jerusalem and in 1990 in Budapest. These meetings were preliminary to the convocation of a bilateral consultation which was planned in Venice few years later.

⁴⁶ Idem, 2.

⁴⁷ Idem, 7.

3.3.1 The 1993 Venice Consultation on "Justification, Scripture and Tradition"

A more carefully prepared conversation between delegations was held in October 1993 in Venice⁴⁹ with "Justification, Scripture and Tradition" as the general theme. The choice of such a triangular topic was the result of a compromise. The Pontifical Council's proposal to focus on a fundamental issue like Scripture and tradition was fully endorsed. Yet, Evangelicals felt that, on the foundational level which the "Reflections" referred to, the doctrine of justification by faith could not be ignored and pressed for it to be included in the course of the discussion.⁵⁰ The outcome of the agreement was thus "Justification, Scripture and Tradition".

There is yet another parallel development within WEF which was certainly influenced, though not determined, by the suggestions contained in the "Reflections". Prior to the Venice consultation, WEF's General Assembly held in Manila in 1992 had given mandate to the Study Unit on Ecumenical Issues under the convenorship of Paul Schrotenboer - the same chairman of the previously encountered Task Force on Roman Catholicism - to produce a collection of papers on "Scripture and Tradition" from a range of biblical, systematic, historical and ecumenical perspectives.⁵¹ The works of such a project have been subsequently published in the *Evangelical Review of Theology* in 1995 and, significantly, one of them is by George Vandervelde on "Scripture and Tradition in the Roman Catholic Church".⁵²

Not only did the contents of the "Reflections" play an important role in deciding the overall theme, but the theological and methodological issues raised by the Council were also echoed and reflected upon in the two papers read in Venice by the Evangelical scholars Henri Blocher and George Vandervelde.

On the question concerning the most appropriate approach in seeking to come to grips with the Evangelical and Roman Catholic theological frameworks, Blocher speaks of even "more basic motives that lie under the divergence"⁵³ on Scripture and tradition dealt with in his response to Avery Dulles' paper. The suggestion not to atomise the discussion in order to focus on fundamentals is accepted, yet on the

⁴⁸ Idem, 2.

⁴⁹ The list of the participants (four Evangelicals and seven Roman Catholics) is published in *ERT* 21:2 (1997) 154.

⁵⁰ Schrotenboer (1997) 101-102. WEF had previously sponsored an international symposium on justification by faith, cf. D. Carson (1992).

⁵¹ Cf. the "Editorial", *ERT* 19:2 (1995) 143.

⁵² Vandervelde (1995).

⁵³ Blocher (1997) 125.

identification of what is theologically constitutive for both traditions, Blocher seems to be pointing to some "underlying factors"⁵⁴ which go beyond the relationship between Scripture and tradition and the nature of the Church. These "factors" are thought to be "the assessment of the effects of human sinfulness", "the emphasis on divine transcendence or freedom", "the view of time" and "the very understanding of salvation" which, in turn, stems from a wholly different articulation and comprehension of the nature-grace motif.⁵⁵ Unfortunately, these sketched references are not supported by any attempt to provide in-depth theological argumentation. For this reason, these observations flash by like meteorites which leave the observer gazing with admiration but completely unable to analyse the phenomenon. However, at least the acknowledgement on the Evangelical side that Roman Catholicism has to be approached in presuppositional terms, leaving aside for the moment the nature of these presuppositions, appears to represent a major step forward in the Evangelical ability to confront it.

As for the ethos of WEF's dialoguing attitude, at the Venice meeting it was admitted that past behaviour had not always been appropriate and this led to the commitment to foster regular exchanges, communications and consultations with catholic institutions. In this respect, WEF delegates have come to the conviction that, in the future, the Fellowship should "not again issue a statement on Roman Catholicism without consulting them before publication".⁵⁶ The reason given is that "Christ's injunctions demand that we do not talk *about* an entire community of fellow believers - especially when that talk is critical - without talking with *that* community".⁵⁷ From these self-critical considerations, it becomes evident that Roman Catholicism will not be dealt with in response to internal concerns as occurred in recent WEF history. Instead, Roman Catholicism has become an issue in its own terms and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity has become a fully recognised and consulted interlocutor in WEF world-wide activity. From Venice onwards, WEF questions monologues and commits itself to constructive dialogue. The underlining persuasion of this development is that "there is merit in sitting down together to express and hopefully resolve differences".⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Idem, 125.

⁵⁵ Idem, 125-127.

⁵⁶ Schrotenboer (1997) 103.

⁵⁷ Vandervelde (1997) 129 (*italics in the original*).

⁵⁸ Schrotenboer (1997) 103.

The Evangelical papers read in Venice can be considered as interesting theological exercises calling for further study and reflection. In response to Avery Dulles who had made a strong case for the argument that both Scripture and tradition flow from a single source⁵⁹ - divine revelation, the Word of God -, both Blocher and Vandervelde stressed the principle of "over-againstness" of Scripture to the tradition of the Church. Though appreciating Dulles' "moderate conservative stance" which allows Evangelicals to be nearer to Roman Catholics than to liberal protestants on this point,⁶⁰ Blocher expresses uneasiness with regard to the co-existence within Roman Catholicism of strong dogmatic statements on the truthfulness and divine authority of Scripture and the more liberal views of some catholic biblical scholars and dogmaticians concerning the doctrine of the Word of God.⁶¹ The discrepancy is somehow mirrored in the ambiguity, perceived by an Evangelical sensitivity, of *Dei Verbum's* treatment of biblical inerrancy, surely asserted ("without error", DV 11) but apparently limited to "that truth which God wanted put into the sacred writings for the sake of our salvation" (DV 11).⁶² As for the status and role of the "global, dynamic, nonverbal concept of tradition" referred to by Dulles,⁶³ Blocher argues that Evangelicals may ascribe to it "only a ministerial, not a magisterial role",⁶⁴ thus considering it in non-negative terms while retaining at the same time the *sola Scriptura* principle "over-against" it as the essential safeguard of Christ's authority over the Church. While appreciating the fact that "*Dei Verbum* ascribes a high status to the Scriptures",⁶⁵ the Evangelical understanding of the material primacy of Scripture cannot agree that tradition is accepted and venerated *pari pietatis affectu et reverentia* (DV 9).⁶⁶

In his paper on "Justification between Scripture and Tradition", Vandervelde surveys the US Lutheran-Catholic dialogue on justification pointing out the discovered "convergences" as well as the persisting "contrasting perspectives"

⁵⁹ Dulles (1997).

⁶⁰ Blocher (1997) 122.

⁶¹ Blocher refers in particular to Raymond Brown and Oswald Loretz as "university professors" whose handling of Scripture is dissonant with regard to "the official bibliographic dogma": idem, 123.

⁶² An Evangelical analysis which tries to come to terms with *Dei Verbum* is Vandervelde (1995).

⁶³ Dulles (1997) 118.

⁶⁴ Blocher (1997) 125.

⁶⁵ Vandervelde (1995) 148.

⁶⁶ Blocher (1997) 125. The same point is made by Vandervelde (1997) 131.

emerged as a result of the bilateral dialogue. The whole discussion is presented against the background of the traditional tridentine teaching and the Reformers' one. One aspect which deserves to be noted is that both parties now agree that justification by faith is only "a criterion, not *the* criterion for the authenticity of the Church"⁶⁷ as the Lutheran tradition used to maintain with the famous saying *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. On this point, Vandervelde introduces a distinction between "necessary and sufficient criteria" for guiding the Church.⁶⁸ Justification belongs to the former, not to the latter, in that "salvation in Christ is too rich, too deep and broad, to be captured by the soteriological cutting edge" of this doctrine.⁶⁹ The "supreme norm" for the Church must not be a no matter how theologically defined "canon within canon" but the entire canon of Scripture under whose authority the Church "needs to submit constantly" for correction and reproof.⁷⁰

3.3.2 The 1997 Jerusalem Consultation on "The Nature and Mission of the Church"

As it was hoped by both parties, the 1993 Venice conversation was to become the first of a series of regular meetings focused on discussing theological matters of mutual interest. Four years later, representatives from both constituencies met in Tantur, Jerusalem, for the second substantial round of talks. The chosen theme of the conversation – "The nature and mission of the Church" - might be thought of as being the result of an agreed compromise between the parties, as it was the case for the Venice consultation on "Justification, Scripture and Tradition". In this respect, reference has to be made again to the 1990 "Reflections" issued by the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity after the release of the 1986 WEF "Perspectives". In this document, while expressing the wish to pursue bilateral dialogue with WEF on "fundamental issues" between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, the Council suggested "the question of the Church as communion and as sacrament" as being one of the two underlining points of divergence which deserved consideration. Retaining the proposed ecclesiological thrust, the conversation actually changed the title having perhaps in mind the fact that "communion" and

⁶⁷ Vandervelde (1997) 138 (italics in the original).

⁶⁸ Idem, 146.

⁶⁹ Idem, 147.

⁷⁰ Idem, 148.

“sacrament” are terms highly significant for Roman Catholic ecclesiology but far less for an Evangelical understanding of the Church. So, “the nature and mission of the Church” surely captures the indication of the Council while employing a theological vocabulary more consonant with Evangelical theological reflection which is definitely more inclined to develop its ecclesiology in missiological terms rather than in communional or sacramental ones.

Not only the methodology of the choice of the theme for the Jerusalem consultation mirrored the pattern adopted in the previous one but also the format of the dialogue was basically the same with two papers read on the “nature” and two on the “mission” of the Church, alternating Roman Catholic and Evangelical contributions.⁷¹ At the end of the meeting, a communiqué was released pinpointing the main contents and results of the dialogue and recommending further conversations “on communion and cooperation in mission, and proselytism and religious freedom in relation to Christian unity”.⁷²

As far as the first section on the “nature” of the Church is concerned, Avery Dulles frames his paper around the standard ecclesiology contained in the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed with the important ecumenical premise - echoing LG 8 - that unity, holiness, catholicity and apostolicity are attributed to the Church of Christ, not directly or exclusively to the Roman Church. The underlining persuasion is that the measure in which the ecclesial properties are present may vary from one communion to another and the Roman Catholic Church acknowledges them in other Churches or ecclesial communities, while claiming that they have been given to her in a fuller way and “as something that she can never lose”.⁷³ The paper then investigates each attribute in the light of the Second Vatican Council’s ecclesiological thrust and ecumenical perspective.⁷⁴ In his contribution to the same

⁷¹ Avery Dulles and George Vandervelde contributed to the Venice consultation too.

⁷² “Evangelicals and Catholics Converse about Church and Mission” (1999). At the end of the communiqué there is the list of the participants to the consultation.

⁷³ Dulles (1999) 17.

⁷⁴ A further reflection on the marks of the Church as they emerge within Roman Catholic and Evangelical ecclesiologies is proposed by Avery Dulles (2000). In this article, after sketching the respective ecclesiological visions, Dulles interestingly argues that “evangelical piety ... is admirably Christocentric but insufficiently ecclesial”, 103. His conclusion is also worth quoting because it highlights a typically Roman Catholic concern when a Roman Catholic is confronted with an Evangelically shaped ecclesiology: “While Catholics seek to profit from what Evangelicals have to teach them, they will urge Evangelicals to be more hospitable to

section, Vandervelde does not directly respond to Dulles - since there is no indication that the papers circulated earlier - but rather tries to investigate ecclesiological "Evangelical soundings". The task appears to be difficult partly because ecclesiology is a theological area in which, traditionally, "evangelicalism is weak"⁷⁵ and partly because the latter presents a significant plurality of convictions and practices which can be seen, for instance, in the difference over an ecclesiological crossroads such as baptism between baptist and paedo-baptist Evangelicals.

Having these preliminary but substantial remarks in mind, Vandervelde, instead of sketching an Evangelical basic ecclesiology, proceeds to focus his attention on the "Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue On Mission" (ERCDOM)⁷⁶ and on the commentaries issued by the Roman Catholic Church and WEF on "Baptism, Eucharist and Ministry". This methodological choice appears to be both historically conscious and ecumenically pertinent since, as a matter of fact, ERCDOM indicates that the issue of Church and mission had already been contemplated in bilateral talks whereas the evaluation of BEM clearly shows, as it were against the light, Catholic and Evangelical ecclesiological principles and concerns. As for BEM, Vandervelde observes that the WEF critique revolved around its alleged "sacramentalism" operating both in the excessive use of "sacramental language" and in the implication of a "sacramentalist causation" concerning baptism and the eucharist. According to WEF, the way BEM envisages the sacraments has a bearing on the role attributed to the ordained ministry and therefore to the whole issue of ecclesial mediation of grace. In line with the somewhat functional and flexible approach to the Christian ministry typical of much Evangelical ecclesiology, WEF finds the constitutive role that BEM attributes to the ordained ministry for the life of the Church highly problematic, thus questioning the fundamental ecclesiological thrust of that paramount ecumenical document. As the Evangelical commentary on BEM has a distinct ecclesiological background rooted in basic Evangelical motives, so the Catholic response mirrors an all-together different understanding of the nature of the Church. Interestingly, Vandervelde argues that "the Roman Catholic Response frequently goes on a direction diametrically opposite

the sacramental model and to the concept of mystical communion that normally goes with that model", 118.

⁷⁵ Vandervelde (1999) 30. Interestingly, Vandervelde quotes in support Stanley Grenz who calls ecclesiology "the neglected stepchild of evangelical theology" and Donald Bloesch who speaks of the Evangelical "appalling neglect of ecclesiology".

to the WEF Response”.⁷⁷ In facts, the Vatican document expresses profound uneasiness towards the lack of an ecclesiological framework in BEM and finds inadequate its elaboration of the notion of sacrament, the nature of the apostolic tradition and that of authority in the Church. If Evangelicals criticise/ BEM for its over-sacramentalised and mediatory view of the Church, Catholics criticise/ it for its rather weak and not worked out ecclesiology. The difference between these two Church-consciousnesses against the background of BEM seems to be “an unbridgeable chasm”.⁷⁸ What is at stake is nothing less than the nature of the Church: in Vandervelde’s terms, “Is the church primarily an institution which, through sacramental rites, administered by a sacramentally constituted priesthood, mediates the grace promised in the gospel, or is the church the gathering of believers whose faith is summoned and sustained by the promises of the gospel communicated by ordained ministers as well as others and signified in sacramental events?”.⁷⁹

At the heart of this “ecclesiological gap” lies the fundamental division between Roman Catholic and Evangelical ecclesiologies, indeed theologies as a whole. According to Vandervelde’s reading especially of LG 1, 8 and 10, in the former, the ontological element prevails over the relational thus paving the way to a conception of the Church as a sacramental and hypostatized divine-human reality. In the latter, instead, the pivotal point to discern the identity of the Church lies entirely on “her privileged *relationship* to Christ”⁸⁰ so that “this unique entity has its *being* only *in this relation*”.⁸¹ The two perspectives appear to be utterly incompatible though Vandervelde indicates that there have been and there will possibly be steps towards convergence. This is the point where ERCDOM comes to the fore. In that dialogue, in facts, the ecclesiological issue was tangentially tackled from a missiological viewpoint particularly in the section on the relationship between the “Church and the Gospel”. Here, the brief fourfold remarks about the Church being “part of the Gospel”, “a fruit of the Gospel”, “an embodiment of the Gospel” and “an agent of the Gospel” may point to a significant area of ecclesiological agreement

⁷⁶ Cf. the section on ERCDOM in the chapter on John Stott: 2.6.2, 104-109.

⁷⁷ Vandervelde (1999) 36.

⁷⁸ Ibidem. Later Vandervelde writes: “At almost every point, then, where the evangelical Response finds BEM explication of the sacrament to be too strong, the Roman Catholic Response finds BEM to be too weak”, 38.

⁷⁹ Vandervelde (1999) 39.

⁸⁰ Idem, 45 (*italics in the original*).

⁸¹ Idem, 46 (*italics in the original*).

based on essential gospel truth and aimed at mission, leaving nonetheless unresolved the basic divergence in terms of theological assumptions and ecclesiological frameworks.

While the theological analysis on the core matter between Roman Catholic and Evangelical understandings of the Church touches on fundamental presuppositions and therefore points out what has to be pursued in ecumenical reflection, the last part of Vandervelde's paper, with its generic reference to a missiological dialogue such as ERCDOM, seems to be a hurried conclusion nurtured more by ecumenical diplomacy than theological insight. If the indications emerged from the contrasting reactions to BEM are feasible and if what is at stake is what Vandervelde himself has so aptly presented, the whole ecclesiological issue, with its extremely wide connections and ramifications, deserves a more careful consideration.

3.3.3 Further Consultations: the 1999 Williams Bay Consultation and the 2001 Mundelein Consultation

The recommendation at the end of the Jerusalem conversation was to explore further the ecclesiological issue by way of dealing more specifically with some critical areas emerging from the dialogue on the Church and mission. More precisely, both WEF delegations and the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity felt that subsequent discussion needed to focus on themes like communion and cooperation in mission, with special reference to the problem of proselytism and religious freedom.⁸² This meeting took place in Williams Bay, Wisconsin, USA, from 7-13 November 1999.

None of the papers of the Williams Bay consultation has been published to date, except the one by Daniel Carroll on the topic "The Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue: Issues revolving around Evangelization. An Evangelical View from Latin America".⁸³ Publication of all the proceedings would allow a more thorough evaluation of the outcome of the event, but a communiqué has been released which summarises the thrust of the meeting.⁸⁴ The consultation revolved around the word *koinonia* whose ecumenical meaning has been explored in relation to its ecclesial

⁸² As reported in Vandervelde, "Introduction" (1999) 12.

⁸³ Carroll (2000) 189-207.

⁸⁴ "Communiqué", *Servizio informazioni promozione unità dei cristiani* (1999) N° 102, 252-253.

dimension and its bearing on issues related to evangelistic practices and cooperative efforts.

In his contribution which focuses on the general Latin America situation, Carroll sketches out the socio-historical context of present day relationship between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The recent and rapid expansion of the Evangelical presence across the continent has made that relationship prominent in the ecumenical agenda and Latin America is an important case-study in which the significance of the word *koinonia* can be appreciated not only theologically but also with reference to all the problems involved in practising it. The fact is that Evangelicals have traditionally been accused of aggressive, cultic proselytism and they, in turn, have tended to accuse Roman Catholics of unbiblical syncretism to the point that each community has generally envisaged the other as hostile to itself.

Against this polemically denoted background and notwithstanding the sweeping post-Vatican II winds in Latin American Roman Catholicism, in all its complexity – from the radicalism of liberation theology to the rather traditionalist stance taken by the ecclesiastical institution – Carroll argues that typically Latin American features of Roman Catholicism like its persistently strong Marian spirituality “would make it very difficult for evangelicals to contemplate a joint effort at evangelism”.⁸⁵ Another powerful obstacle to cooperation is the perception of many Evangelicals that the whole Roman Catholic discourse on the “new evangelization” can ultimately be thought of as being “an effort to renew the context, primarily within the traditional perspective that sees Roman Catholic faith as the foundation and integrating factor of Latin American life, and to maintain the religious primacy of the Church”.⁸⁶ Whereas Carroll thinks that cooperation in evangelism is still difficult, if not impossible, the possibility of common action is more promising if it is intended “to find appropriate solutions to the grave social issues today in Latin America”.⁸⁷ It is perhaps a *koinonia* of service which is the viable ground for Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to begin to explore the wider meaning and implications of the reality of *koinonia* itself.

At the end of the Williams Bay consultation, both delegations decided to sponsor another meeting in 2001 in order to pursue further the already well established dialogue between WEF and the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for

⁸⁵ Carroll (2000) 197.

⁸⁶ Idem, 198.

Promoting Christian Unity. The planned meeting was held in Mundelein, Illinois, USA in February 2001. The theme of koinonia was still at the centre of the conversation while a joint document is expected to be approved during the next consultation scheduled for 2002.

⁸⁷ Idem, 205.

CHAPTER FOUR

EVANGELICAL-ROMAN CATHOLIC COMMON STATEMENTS

The last thirty years have witnessed a significant increase in opportunities for dialogue between confessional groupings within Christendom. The Second Vatican Council's encouragement of a more active involvement of Catholics in the ecumenical movement, and the decision of many Eastern Orthodox Churches to join the World Council of Churches officially at the New Delhi Assembly were true landmarks in recent ecumenical history. In the midst of all the changes which these developments have prompted, the world-wide Evangelical movement has not been bypassed by the ecumenical impetus which other Christian constituencies have experienced since the beginning of the Sixties. In this respect, substantial references have already been made in the course of the research to the *Evangelical-Roman Catholic Dialogue on Mission* (ERCDOM), which was initiated after the publication of the encyclical *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and the Lausanne Congress for World Evangelization, as well as to the on-going talks between the World Evangelical Fellowship (WEF) and the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity (PCPCU).

4.1 "EVANGELICALS AND CATHOLICS TOGETHER" (ECT)

Bearing in mind this general background, there is yet another initiative that deserves to be mentioned as far as Evangelical interaction with Roman Catholicism is concerned, although it does not seem to be directly related to the above mentioned ecumenical Evangelical initiatives nor does it appear to be in any way connected to the confessional institutions which had been involved up to that point.¹ When the 8,000 word statement "Evangelicals and Catholics Together. Toward a Common Mission" (ECT) was released in New York at the end of March 1994,² the series of ecumenical encounters was further lengthened by a document significantly different from previous efforts, though it was certainly facilitated by official bilaterals, especially the well-known dialogue between Lutherans and Roman Catholics in the

¹ Colson and Neuhaus explicitly say that the talks leading to ECT were "independent of the official conversations between the Roman Catholic and various evangelical Protestants bodies"; Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xiii.

² The full statement is published in Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xv-xxxiii.

US and that between Southern Baptists and the Roman Catholic Church.³ Both ECT's context and content, coupled with its highly controversial reception within the Evangelical world and the developments which have followed since its publication, present some interesting features which make it worth while to ponder on.

4.1.1 The North-American background to ECT

Before attempting to appraise theologically the Evangelical participation and contribution to the process which finalised in ECT, it is vitally important to describe the *milieu* which gave birth to the document and which nurtures the sustained activities which have been carried out under its aegis thus far. In fact, both the reasons behind ECT and the continental context where it was conceived and eventually drafted are decisive elements in discerning its theological thrust and ecumenical weight. As already mentioned in preceding sections, the chief motivating factor behind ERCDOM was the release of two important missiological statements, whereas the contingent spur for the official dialogue between WEF and PCPCU was the strong reaction of some Evangelicals to the presence of catholic observers at the 1978 WEF Assembly. With regard to ECT, however, the architects of the whole dialoguing project indicate that its immediate background is to be sought in the American socio-political scene of the Eighties.⁴

Without even verging on the multifaceted debate on that period of recent history, it is sufficient to take into account the criteria of evaluation used by ECT promoters in their assessment of those years. From their critical perspective, that decade witnessed a dramatic deepening of the chasm between opposing cultural forces in the American "public square".⁵ In this alarmed view, American society is facing a tragic situation whereby it is gradually breaking up as a result of nothing less than a "clash of worldviews". The fighting forces confronting each other are, on the one hand, what is elsewhere called "moral majority" who wish to defend a Christian-based moral vision and social policy, and, on the other, the emerging, rampant

³ The only quotation in ECT is taken from the 1988 Baptist-Roman Catholic International Conversation; cf. Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xxix.

⁴ This is the common thread which links together the collection of essays which accompany ECT; cf. Colson-Neuhaus (1995).

⁵ This kind of approach can be found, for instance, in Neuhaus (1984), Colson (1987), Fournier (1994) as well as in essays like Colson, "The Common Cultural Task: The Culture War from a Protestant Perspective" and Weigel, "Faith, Freedom ,

segment of society who want to abandon the traditionally American ethos or radically rethink it in terms of postmodern trends of thought. In this line of socio-cultural interpretation of the dynamics of American life, relativistic liberalism is viewed as taking advantage of the momentous processes of transformation in the contemporary world, while religious conservatism seems to be on the defensive only trying to fill the gaps in the crumbling fabric of society. In the worried perception of the politically conservative observers across the wide spectrum of religious allegiances, the range of battle fields is extremely diverse and includes thorny issues like abortion, pornography, homosexuality, euthanasia, the nature and integrity of the family, education value-systems and basic social patterns. However, all these areas are thought of as being single instances of a violent "culture war" in which the basic orientation of individual and national life is at stake. Nothing less than the present and the future of America depend on the outcome of this "culture war" and, given the widespread appreciation within conservative circles for the seemingly providential role of America in world history, the destiny of the entire planet is seen to be at issue in the whole conflict.

Leaving aside the otherwise vital question related to the basic plausibility of socio-cultural analysis as such, what is important at this point is the need to take into account the supposedly driving force which was behind the process which led to a mutual acknowledgement between some Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.⁶ It is true that their encounter began to take shape at grass roots level in the Seventies, especially in the pro-life movement, after centuries of mutual harsh polemics.⁷ But the Eighties present a completely different situation. In fact, in the midst of this dramatic confrontation in American society, and perhaps because of it and through it, confessionally divided Christians found themselves sharing religiously grounded moral convictions and fighting on the same side of the battle front in public life. On the grounds of this convergence, pressing calls were made within the ranks of the religious right to promote the "neo-conservative difference"⁸ in order to engage more

Responsibility: Evangelicals and Catholics in the Public Square" both in Colson-Neuhaus (1995), 1-44 and 45-80.

⁶ The different stages of the history of ECT are summarized in Colson-Neuhaus (1995) x-xiii.

⁷ Cf. M. Noll, "The History of the Encounter: Roman Catholics and Protestant Evangelicals" in Colson-Neuhaus (1995) 81-114. Cf. also R. Nash, "Evangelical and Catholic Cooperation in the Public Arena" in J. Armstrong, ed. (1994) 181-197.

⁸ Weigel (1995).

vigorously in the challenge of saving America from relativistic disruption. In response to these appeals, ECT could be considered as a response from sections of the religious groupings involved in the American religious right. Those Evangelicals and Roman Catholics who have endorsed it manifest their willingness to stand side by side in the fight because they find themselves in agreement on the frightening analysis of the present state of the nation as well as on the only possible remedy to the attack of postmodern thought, ethics and policies. The relationship between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics which is contemplated in ECT is a sort of ecumenism of the trenches born out of a common moral struggle in American society to proclaim and implement at all levels the Christian heritage and values in a culture in disarray. Thinking of the background and vision of such a coalition, Bolt has referred to it as an “ecumenical jihad”.⁹

From what has been briefly pointed out, the American context has played a substantial role in the whole process of ECT. The document would perhaps be unthinkable without America or even outside America. “Its American provenance cannot be concealed”¹⁰ and, furthermore, this fact provides the main interpretative key in seeking to understand it.

4.1.2 The Theological Issues Raised by ECT

ECT mirrors the specific situation of contemporary America but it is also a significant step which goes beyond mere recognition of the need for co-operation in the public arena between concerned conservatives. ECT is of theological interest in that this kind of coalition is said to have a fundamental theological basis. It is clear from their writings that ECT drafters and supporters appeal not only to a relatively similar evaluation of current social trends and to the shared core values advocated by some politically conservative Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. They have no difficulty in claiming that the possibility, indeed the necessity, of co-operation between conservative Christians in the “public square” is primarily warranted by their theological common roots in spite of past and present confessional divisions. Sharing a political and moral agenda for society is just one area of common concern, and that co-belligerence is also an expression of a “theologically rooted alliance”.¹¹

⁹ Bolt (2001), though he acknowledges that the expression has been used by Peter Kreeft in his book *Ecumenical Jihad*.

¹⁰ Wright (1996) 94.

¹¹ Colson, “The Common Cultural Task” in Colson-Neuhaus (1995) 3.

ECT has been possible because some Evangelicals and Roman Catholics have come together on the basis of their basic Christian identity, notwithstanding the centuries-old Evangelical-Catholic differentiation. In this respect, the above mentioned common cause in the political arena takes on distinctly theological overtones by becoming a “common mission”, a proper act of Christian witness with all its specific presuppositions and wide implications. Colson well summarises the nexus between politics and religion which lies behind ECT when he argues that “It’s high time that all of us who are Christians come together regardless of the difference of our confessions and our traditions and make common cause to bring Christian values to bear in our society”.¹² The connection between socio-political motives and theological justification for common action is also clearly visible in the order of the statement whereby the section “We Contend Together”, which is focused on “culture war” concerns, is preceded by the section “We Affirm Together” where a basic confession of faith is outlined, and then followed by the programmatic paragraph entitled “We Witness Together” where a qualified commitment to Christian mission is envisaged. In other words, according to ECT, contending in society is based on affirming gospel truth and is aimed at witnessing to the world.

This basic theological core is the real centre around which ECT revolves, most particularly as far as its Evangelical signatories are concerned. From a post-Vatican II catholic perspective, in fact, there is nothing exceptional in acknowledging together with other Christians the existence of “common convictions about Christian faith and mission”¹³ which lead to the recognition of dialoguing partners as “brothers and sisters in Christ”.¹⁴ As for Evangelicals, on the contrary, this ecumenical habit and readiness has not been a feature of their history and practice, especially in relation to Roman Catholics. In this respect, if it is borne in mind that until the Sixties, “Protestant anti-Romanism” was a very influential staple in American Evangelicalism,¹⁵ the committed language of togetherness, oneness, unity, co-operation which permeates ECT is much more telling than its ordinary usage in widespread ecumenical jargon. Evidently, in the case of ECT, the pervasive “We-

¹² “Foreword” to Fournier (1990) vi.

¹³ ECT, Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xv.

¹⁴ Idem, xviii and xxiii.

¹⁵ Noll as in n. 7.

Together” pattern is much more ecumenically significant than in other bilateral documents.¹⁶

The doctrinal basis for this Evangelically discovered or catholically reaffirmed unity in the gospel is the Apostles’ Creed which both parties wholeheartedly indicate as being “an accurate statement of scriptural truth”.¹⁷ The appreciation of this basic, albeit foundational, agreement does not eschew the frank assertion concerning “authentic disagreements”, “deep and long-standing differences”, “communal and ecclesial separations” which are barriers to full communion even between otherwise like-minded Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.¹⁸ Beside acknowledging the distance between communities, ECT drafters also provide a non-exhaustive but substantial list of problematic areas which includes fundamental issues regarding the nature of the Church and ministry, the authority of Scripture, the sacraments, and devotion to Mary and the saints.¹⁹ These matters are not to be avoided or downplayed but fully debated and thoroughly researched. They are mentioned in the section “We Search Together” which is a further commitment on the part of the signatories to work and study side by side. In this respect, ECT is not intended to have a panacea effect on the division nor is it animated by the wishful thinking of possible solutions. In calling for common action and in pointing out the theological legitimacy of a common confession of faith inherited by the undivided Church while at the same time indicating doctrinal points of divergence, ECT is rather “an invitation to reexamine stereotypes, prejudices, and conventional ideas that have been entrenched, in some cases, for almost five hundred years”.²⁰ The aim of such an informal, “disciplined and sustained conversation” is intended to be positive and constructive, that is “to strengthen between us a relationship of trust in obedience of truth”.²¹ Elsewhere, bearing in mind the cultural conflict in America, Colson argues that divisive disputes between confessing Christians are counterproductive for both the causes of the gospel and of the nation considering that “when the barbarians are scaling the walls, there is no time for petty quarrelling in

¹⁶ Sproul reports that, according to Richard Neuhaus, this affirmation is “at the core of the entire document”, Sproul (1996) 15.

¹⁷ ECT, Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xix.

¹⁸ Idem, xx-xxii.

¹⁹ The 10-point list is in ECT, Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xxi.

²⁰ Colson-Neuhaus (1995) ix.

²¹ As it is stated in ECT, Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xxi.

the camp”.²² The non-confrontational line espoused by ECT is also visible in the expressed goal of nonproselytization between professing Christians and in the encouragement which the statement gives to focusing the attention on the task of reaching those who are outside the broad community of faith instead of trying to convert who are already believers.

As to its significance for the present state and future development of Evangelical-Catholic theological debate, ECT is concerned with the legitimacy and methodology of the dialogue to be pursued rather than with its theological profile. As far as the latter goes, ECT does not break any new ground as to the indication of a penetrating theological epistemology regarding what is vitally at stake in assessing Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical perspective and viceversa. Like other attempts already surveyed in the course of the research, the appreciation of the basic differences between the two traditions is also vitiated by the inability to come to terms with the profound theological points at issue in their fundamental thrust and systemic relatedness. Although the document is significant in terms of ecumenical mutual recognition, no great progress is made in terms of theological insight. As for the latter, ECT does not tread any further than the mere listing of the often repeated *cahiers de doléances*, as if the diversity can be reduced to a more or less congruous enumeration of areas of doctrinal dispute. The affirmation of a common confession of the gospel and the willingness to address the points of continuing disagreement in brotherly conversation are governed by a fragmented, atomistic approach in treating the theological dimension of the division. In fairness, it is perhaps arguable that the contingent socio-cultural motivations and preoccupations which were predominant in ECT’s background apparently lead the whole dialoguing process to be shaped by a sort of theological pragmatism and wilful superficiality in dealing with the core matters between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

4.1.3 The Spectrum of Evangelical Reactions to ECT

ECT’s Evangelical signatories reach far across the wide spectrum of present-day American Evangelicalism, though they participated in it strictly as individuals acting from and to their denominational or para-church constituencies but not on behalf of them. Their independence or isolation from their respective communities emerged after its publication in that it gave rise to much controversy, especially in America.

²² “Foreword” to Fournier (1990) vi.

While on the Roman Catholic side, “relatively little commotion has resulted from the conciliatory statement”,²³ the American Evangelical world at large does not seem to have received it with the enthusiasm its promoters hoped for. Although sundry ecumenically-minded Evangelicals have accepted ECT quite positively, the release of the statement has produced much bewilderment and disarray in wider Evangelical circles and, as a result of that, a vast amount of harshly critical, sometimes demolishing evaluations in book or article form has been produced in reaction to the ECT process in general and the document in particular.²⁴ The debate following it has rarely been characterised by a constructive, thoughtful attitude but has rather exposed the serious rift within Evangelicalism on fundamental theological orientations and concerns, and not just over the issue of how to relate to Roman Catholicism.²⁵ In Packer’s vivid words, ECT has inevitably come “under evangelical fire”²⁶ with “bleak, skewed, fearful, and fear-driven things”²⁷ being said about it. In spite of all their diversity, such negative critical judgements share some basic common strands which can be highlighted, varying from the claim that ECT jeopardises the gospel to the charge that it betrays the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith,²⁸ it blurs the meaning of the word “Christian”,²⁹ it confuses Christian mission with a social agenda, it undermines evangelism in catholic countries, and so forth. The scope and tone of the criticism has been so drastic and clear-cut because for many Evangelicals “no less than Christian theological integrity is thought to be at stake”.³⁰

Apart from strong opposition from individual theologians, journals and Church leaders, even a highly representative Evangelical institution, the *World Evangelical Fellowship* (WEF), which is itself carrying on an official dialogue with the Roman Catholic Church, thought it appropriate to issue a “commentary on ECT”

²³ Charles (1996) 73.

²⁴ Cf. Duggins (1993), MacArthur (1994), George (1994), Kantzer (1994), Ankerberg-Weldon (1995), Zins (1995), Reed (1995), Fuller (1996), Grier (1997), McCarthy (1997), Robbins (1998).

²⁵ For a survey of Evangelical reactions, cf. Geisler-MacKenzie (1995) 491-502 and Charles (1996).

²⁶ J. Packer, “Crosscurrents among Evangelicals” in Colson-Neuhaus (1995) 149. In this paper, Packer assesses and responds to the evangelical criticism of ECT. On Packer’s involvement in the ECT process, cf. McGrath (1997) 264-275.

²⁷ Packer (1994) 34. The stages of Packer’s own involvement in ECT and assessments of it are critically reviewed by Zins (1995) 218-228.

²⁸ Sproul (1996) 10-30 and 152-155; Eveson (1996) 89-96.

²⁹ Murray (1996) 12.

³⁰ Charles (1996) 74.

expressing perplexities on the document and distancing itself from the initiative as a whole.³¹ More specifically, WEF refuses to link a commendable “ecumenism of the trenches” as far as culture war is concerned to the possibility for Evangelicals and Roman Catholics to do evangelism and mission together when “the doctrinal differences ... remain unresolved”.³² Furthermore, WEF underlines the semantic problem together with the interpretative issue involved in joint statements such as ECT whereby “the use of common language does not mean that the meanings are the same”.³³ In other words, the mere act of subscribing a declaration is no indication of a genuinely recovered unity if each party attributes substantially different nuances to the agreed text. Implicit in this remark is that ECT’s ambiguities show that thorough theological groundwork cannot be avoided if genuine dialogue is to make progress.

Another significant response to ECT has come from an authoritative Evangelical para-church agencies, the *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* (ACE).³⁴ In reacting to ECT not just in negative terms but with the desire of suggesting basic guidelines for subsequent Evangelical-Catholic discussion, ACE issued seven “Resolutions for Roman Catholic and Evangelical Dialogue”.³⁵ Clearly distancing themselves from ECT’s purported creedal unity, the “Resolutions” affirm that “this catholic consensus” over the ecumenical creeds is not perceived “as a sufficient basis for declaring that agreement exists on all the essential elements of the Gospel” (1). According to ACE, this kind of confessional unity could be found only when the other essential tenet of the Gospel is included, that is “justification by faith alone” without which the “adequacy of any version of the Gospel” is deemed as falling short. As for this pivotal doctrine, “radical disagreement continues” between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics (2). Creedal consensus as advocated by ECT, however, warrants “the making of common cause on moral and cultural issues in society” though this cooperation should not be regarded as a “common ecclesial action in fulfilling a common ecclesial mission” (4). While rejoicing in the awareness that “the Roman Catholic Church contains many .. believers”, ACE states that as an

³¹ Vencer (1996).

³² Ibidem.

³³ Ibidem.

³⁴ Other responses to ECT from Evangelical bodies are critically surveyed by Zins (1998) 232-239.

³⁵ ACE (1994). It is perhaps worth noticing that Jim Packer signed both ECT and these “Resolutions”.

ecclesial institution, it is not “an acceptable Christian communion, let alone being the mother of all the faithful” (6).

On the whole, then, ECT has stirred much discussion and criticism in Evangelical circles, showing that the whole initiative can be considered as an *avant-garde* with respect to the “centre” of the movement. ECT has also provided an occasion for Evangelicals to reflect afresh on the issue of Roman Catholicism and on the wider stance of Evangelicalism in the present-day ecumenical scene.

4.1.4 Conclusion

ECT has a historical and geographical specificity which makes it a distinct statement and differentiates it from what has emerged from other Evangelical ventures in relations with Roman Catholics. This brief critical survey on the historical background to ECT, its disputed theological content and multifarious reception within the American Evangelical world indicate the crucial influence of non-theological factors in initiating, accompanying and finalising the document. These considerations suggest that its theological input into the shaping of an Evangelical perspective on Roman Catholicism is deficient and, therefore, requires to be further elaborated. In this respect, the urgency of the culture war, necessary as it is, cannot replace what primarily pertains to theological reflection.

4.2 “THE GIFT OF SALVATION” (GOS)

In the intention of the drafters, the ECT document was conceived as an initial step in the deepening of a mutual commitment to dialogue between its Evangelical and Roman Catholic contributors. The multifaceted Evangelical critical appraisal of the main tenets of the statement apparently strengthened the conviction that there was a need for further conversations, especially on the weaker, problematic areas which had come under strong criticism. Since ECT was much more than a simple attestation of socio-political convergence within conservative circles in American society, and entailed an engaging affirmation of “unity” based on the common confession of the gospel, further reflection ought to be aimed at a fuller exploration of the theological connotations and a more adequate articulation of this fundamental thrust of ECT. The first result of this continuing and more sharply focused debate was a shorter document released in November 1997 under the title of “The Gift of

Salvation”.³⁶ Sponsored and led by the same authors as ECT, namely Charles Colson and Richard Neuhaus, GOS stems from the prolongation of the process initiated by ECT and can be thought of as being an elucidation of the controversial section “We Affirm Together” of the previous document. The filial connection with ECT is also evoked when GOS is sometimes called ECT II. So, while the reception of GOS is still in progress and various reactions to it are being presented, the theological tenor of the new document calls for attention.

4.2.1 The Theologically More Qualified “Unity” Expressed in GOS

As it has already been suggested in the section on ECT, the real gain of the whole ecumenical process which resulted in ECT according to some supporters was considered by some Evangelical critics to be its fatal flaw. Notwithstanding this sharply different assessment, the mutual recognition as “brothers and sisters in the Lord”, not only limited to the drafters but extended to all Evangelicals and Roman Catholics who confess Jesus as Lord, can be considered a major development in Evangelical-Catholic relationships in the present-day American context. What appears to sustain this brotherly reciprocity is the “unity” in the common confession of the gospel as it is authoritatively worded in the Apostles’ Creed. ECT arrived at this conclusion and, not surprisingly, this has been the exact issue which has given rise to the most critical Evangelical remarks. Expressing a trenchant comment often repeated in Evangelical reactions to ECT, Sproul asks whether Evangelicals have the right to root an alleged confessional unity apart from, besides or beyond an unambiguous agreement on the doctrine of justification by faith alone. Granting the decisive importance of *sola fide* in historic Protestantism and noting the noisy silence in ECT over it, Sproul defines it “the missing doctrine” of the statement.³⁷ In his view, its omission either means that ECT does not perceive justification by faith to be as an essential aspect of the Christian faith or that the long controversy over it between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics has now been resolved. It is clear that both assumptions are not feasible and that the absence can only be explained in terms of ecumenical diplomacy. The train of Sproul’s argument goes as far as to say that this kind of apparent neutrality or wilful bypassing fudges the whole effort and empties the statement of any ecumenical credibility. At this point, Sproul voices a

³⁶ The GOS text was originally published in *Christianity Today* (Dec 8, 1997) 34.

³⁷ Sproul (1996) 22-24.

conservative Evangelical quasi-consensus in holding that without coming to terms with *sola fide*, that is without a full acceptance of the protestant doctrine of imputed righteousness on the catholic side, the possibility of even speaking of “unity” is indeed a sheer impossibility, given the corner-stone role of justification in protestant Evangelicalism especially in relation to or against the catholic understanding of it as it was framed at Trent. In light of this opinion shared by many Evangelical critics of ECT, Christian unity cannot be reached at the expense of the Reformation doctrine of justification by faith alone because without this doctrine there is no evangelically interpreted Christian gospel.

Taking these reservations seriously into account, ECT drafters eventually decided to engage in the debate precisely over the crucial issue of *sola fide*. In this way, they wished to demonstrate that the kind of ecumenism favoured by the participants is an “ecumenism of conviction”, not one of “accommodation”³⁸ as was charged against the vagueness of ECT on various matters. Given this background, justification by faith comes to the fore as the obvious doctrine on which dialoguing investment has to concentrate while socio-political concerns and culture war are set aside. The outcome of such an ecumenical endeavour is that, while restating with ECT the confession of a “common faith in Christ” and the acknowledgement of “one another as brothers and sisters in Christ”, GOS strives to deepen the theological quality of the professed unity after addressing the core soteriological issue of the Reformation. If ECT confessed unity on the basis of the Apostles’ Creed, GOS claims that it is also possible to envisage “a common understanding of salvation”, including an agreed version of *sola fide*. With this development, the ECT process has gained in its supporters’ opinion a theological merit in that the unity expressed in GOS is “not indeed unity in every aspect of the gospel, but unity in its basic dimension”³⁹ which bridges the confessions of faith of the undivided Church and that of contemporary American conservative Christianity without ignoring the doctrinal specificity of the historic protestant tradition. Another point underlined by some GOS Evangelical signatories is that the professed unity testified to in the statement is a bond between “*some* Roman Catholics and *some* evangelicals”, not implying at all “a unity of faith with the church of Rome”.⁴⁰ The level of brotherly recognition

³⁸ These expressions are employed by George, Oden, Packer (1998).

³⁹ Ibidem.

⁴⁰ Ibidem (*italics in the original*).

concerns individual catholic believers involved in the process while no recognition of that kind is extended to Roman Catholicism as an ecclesial institution.

4.2.2 Justification by Faith According to GOS

Rather boldly and with a hit of triumphalism, after outlining the content of the accord over salvation, GOS states that what has been affirmed “is in agreement with what the Reformation traditions have meant by justification by faith alone (*sola fide*)”. In view of such a statement, it should not be a surprise to read that, according to the signatories, “for the first time in 450 years, Evangelical Protestants and Roman Catholics have publicly agreed to a common understanding of salvation”.⁴¹ Without making any reference to the Lutheran-Catholic Joint Declaration nor to any other relevant bilateral document or ecumenical dialogue on the same doctrine, these claims sound rather curious because they give the impression of a major breakthrough of historical importance achieved through an informal, unofficial and relatively short dialogue culminating in the release of a concise and hurried text. Reflecting on the ecumenical *ethos* of the whole initiative, it can be argued that the sort of pragmatic ecumenism resulting in ECT seems to have also operated in GOS with a certain measure of consistency.

As for the content itself, the GOS presentation of the doctrine of justification makes ample use of biblical language but adamantly avoids any attempt to pursue a distinct systematic slant. After sketching out the salvation history theme encompassing God’s creation, the human fall and the salvific significance of Jesus Christ’s ministry, salvation is depicted in terms of “restoration of communion with God”, “eschatological rescue from sin”, “a present reality” which is “an anticipation and foretaste” of its promised fullness. Moreover, salvation is seen as being “absolutely dependent upon Jesus Christ” whose redemptive work has been accomplished “by Christ’s atoning sacrifice on the cross” and can be biblically described in several ways, among which are “justification, reconciliation, restoration of friendship with God, and rebirth from above by which we are adopted as children of God and made heirs of the Kingdom”. Against this selective scriptural background, justification receives further attention in that it is said to be “central to the scriptural account of salvation”. In this respect, GOS claims that it is “entirely God’s gift”, not implying “any good works or merits of our own”. Stressing its

⁴¹ Frame (1998) 61.

essentially declarative nature, it is asserted that in justification “God, on the basis of Christ’s righteousness alone, declares us to be no longer his rebellious enemies but his forgiven friends, and by virtue of his declaration it is so”. However, GOS reaches its climax when it goes on to say that the gift of justification “is received through faith”, though it significantly omits at this point the theologically-laden adjective *alone*. Apparently, the vaguely protestant outlook of the statement is moderated by the concession of the elimination of *sola* from the apprehension of the doctrine. The rest of GOS clarifies that faith, being “an act of the whole person”, issues in “a changed life” which continuously progresses in sanctification, involves “participation in the body of Christ” and enables believers “to persevere to the end”.

The newly discovered possibility of confessing together “fundamental truths about the gift of salvation” does not imply an unawareness of “some serious and persistent differences” between the Evangelical signatories and the catholic ones on specific details or broad frameworks related to the doctrine itself. Looking at justification by faith from a more theologically conscious and historically alert perspective, the representatives of the two communities are confronted with “necessarily interrelated questions that require further and urgent exploration”, among which the following are: “the meaning of baptismal regeneration, the Eucharist and sacramental grace, the historic uses of the language of justification as it relates to imputed and transformative righteousness” and “the normative status of justification in relation to all Christian doctrine”.

On the whole, then, while testifying to a further advancement along the path of an “ecumenism of conviction” than ECT was able to express, GOS is also an interlocutory step which is in itself theologically deficient in coming to grips with the centuries-long dispute concerning the *articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae*. GOS might be thought of as having substantial ecumenical value for having created a friendly if not brotherly opportunity for doctrinal debate, but its theological import is partially invalidated by its rather naïve approach to what is a highly nuanced matter. In Sproul’s telling words, “the ECT initiative is seriously, if not fatally, flawed since it proclaims too much way too soon”.⁴²

⁴² Sproul (1998). In the same respect, commenting on the initial Vatican rejection of the Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration on the doctrine of justification, Neuhaus writes that “the Lutheran formula of *simul iustus et peccator*, which was Rome’s chief objection to JD, is no part of «The Gift of Salvation»”, *First Things* 86

4.2.3 Evangelical Criticism of GOS

As it might be expected, in spite of the good wishes of the promoters, GOS is facing nonetheless the negative responses of different strands of the Evangelical movement. It should be noted that the same circles that did not appreciate ECT are showing no change of attitude towards the alleged achievements of GOS. The tone of many appraisals sounds very similar to previous verdicts, including the charge of “selling out the Reformation”⁴³ and that of being a “disappointing sequel” to ECT.⁴⁴

As for the merits of the document, the main reservation advanced by the *Alliance of Confessing Evangelicals* (ACE) is that GOS fails “adequately to express the essential Protestant understanding of the gospel” in that it does not grapple with the concept of imputation.⁴⁵ What GOS does is to indulge in “ambiguous expressions” which result as perfectly compatible within a Roman Catholic perspective. The blatant paradox seen by ACE is that “while ECT expressed concern over the relativisation of truth in our day it has led in GOS to a relativising of the most important truth of all, namely, the Gospel itself”.⁴⁶

The problem of ambiguity is also evoked by Sproul, for whom GOS has been drawn up with a “studied ambiguity by which agreement is reached in words but not in substance, leaving each side the opportunity to maintain its original position”.⁴⁷ Moreover, given the admission of a “serious and persistent” difference on the language of imputation (which is inseparably linked to the concept of imputation), what is presented as an agreement on justification by faith as the protestant traditions understood it, is not *sola fide* but a deformed or at best limited version of it. In this train of evaluation, GOS only affirms “ingredients” of *sola fide*, not *sola fide* itself. Of course, this criticism is mainly addressed at Evangelical participants who have presented the common declaration in a much more positive way. As for Roman Catholic signatories, their unwillingness to embrace *sola fide* wholeheartedly is perfectly legitimate.

(Oct 1998) 82. Neuhaus too recognises that the central issue of the Protestant-Catholic divergence on the doctrine was untouched by GOS.

⁴³ Cf. Moore (1998).

⁴⁴ Zins (1998) 255.

⁴⁵ ACE (1998).

⁴⁶ Ibidem.

⁴⁷ Sproul (1998).

The question of how to approach an interconfessional dialogue is also raised in other comments which focus on the methodology of ecumenical encounters, with particular reference to the criteria followed in addressing the points at issue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. As for GOS, the document seems to encourage an isolated, atomistic, unsystematic way of conducting the conversation. Applying these critical remarks to GOS, that means that “from an Evangelical point of view, it is practically meaningless to uphold together with Roman Catholics the doctrine of justification by faith, on the one hand, and express a sharp disagreement on ‘baptismal regeneration’, ‘the Eucharist’, ‘sacramental grace’, ‘diverse understandings of merit, reward, purgatory, and indulgences’, ‘Marian devotion and the assistance of the saints’, etc., on the other. Unlike the catholic one, the Evangelical framework cannot tolerate such diversity and calls for a choice”.⁴⁸ In other words, GOS manifestly lacks a theologically “integrated approach” in dealing with the doctrine of justification by faith and, therefore, it achieves far less than is claimed by its proponents. A more realistic assessment would be that it is the flawed result of a rather simplistic approach to ecumenical discussion between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics.

4.3 “The Gospel of Jesus Christ” (GJC)

The process which has led from ECT to GOS has shown that while confronting Roman Catholicism, Evangelicals reflect and act upon their own identity. The question of how to deal with Roman Catholics can be answered only after one has tackled what does it mean to be an Evangelical. Differences in the area of ecumenism generally reflect divergences in understanding of what is constitutive for the Evangelical faith. It should not be surprising therefore that after having ventured in conversations with Catholics and received some negative reactions from within the movement, the Evangelical promoters and their critics have come back to the issue of Evangelical doctrinal identity, and inevitably so. This pause in Evangelical reflection on the ecumenical process has given birth to “The Gospel of Jesus Christ. An Evangelical Celebration”⁴⁹ which is a basic statement on the evangel nurtured by

⁴⁸ IFED (1999).

⁴⁹ The GJC text was published on *Christianity Today* (Jun 14, 1999) 51-56. R.C. Sproul provides an useful, article by article, commentary on the statement in his *Getting the Gospel Right* (1999).

strong Evangelical convictions and aimed at a broad Evangelical consensus, beyond past and present contrasts on ecumenical initiatives.

GJC is meant to be a “celebration” of the gospel, a brief dogmatic outline of the content of the biblical message expressed in a rather doxological vein. A part from this general thrust, the main emphasis of the document revolves around the doctrine of justification by faith, its place within the Evangelical confession of the gospel and its theological articulation vis-à-vis recent disputes within Evangelicalism itself. If GOS pointed the way to a possible convergence between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics on justification which was criticised by some Evangelicals, GJC spells out the basic and shared Evangelical understanding of the same doctrine. The paramount desire is to stress the forensic view of justification and this is achieved by the insertion in the text of a list of synonymous verbs or nouns when the meaning of justification is sketched out. So, it is said that “God «justifies the wicked» (ungodly: Rom 4:5) by imputing (reckoning, crediting, counting, accounting) righteousness to them”. Later GJC speaks of “the doctrine of the imputation (reckoning or counting) both of our sins to Christ and of his righteousness to us” (12) and of Christ’s righteousness which is “counted, reckoned, or imputed to us by the forensic (that is, legal) declaration of God” (13). All the semantic tree of the forensic language of justification is employed to focus on the declarative dimension of the act of justification. Another related concern is the willingness to underline what happens in justification in terms of a “decisive transition, here and now” and “transaction”. Of course, though unmentioned, the distinct protestant perspective on justification with its anti-Roman Catholic overtone is clearly in the background of such statements. Other aspects of the evangel are not as emphasised as justification by faith alone⁵⁰ but, in light of the history and purposes of GJC, the insistence on “sola fide” should not be taken as an underestimation of necessarily related truths concerning God’s saving work. Since every text has its context, GJC has its own in the debate over justification which ECT and GOS gave rise to.

It is too early to evaluate the reception that GJC will receive in Evangelical circles, in particular whether or not it will function as an adequate basis for drawing together Evangelicals who have different ecumenical sensitivities. It is certainly true

⁵⁰ In a brief letter Cornelius Plantinga, John Stackhouse and Nicholas Wolterstorff, amongst others, have expressed reservations on the fact that GJC seems to refer to justification at the expense of sanctification, thus failing to represent a real Evangelical consensus; cf. *Christianity Today* (Oct 4, 1999) 15.

that the only hope for Evangelicals to strive for unity is to appreciate the core of their faith. In the light of internal disputes over ecumenical issues, the message of GJC seems to be: back to square one, back to the evangel.

After the introductory preamble, two paragraphs on “the Gospel” and “Unity in the Gospel” and before the final section on “Our Commitment”, the rest of GJC is construed using a composite pattern whereby affirmations concerning various constitutive elements of the evangel are followed by denials of possible misunderstandings or incompatible statements with the previously asserted truths. The rationale behind such a procedure seems to imply that the act of affirming something is only one side of the task related to the spelling out of the Evangelical doctrinal identity. The other unavoidable aspect has to do with denying what is perceived as being contrary to what is positively affirmed. The gospel can be witnessed to propositionally by way of positive assertions and negative derivations. In contemporary history of confessional declarations, this pattern has noble precedents in the *Barmen Declaration* (1934) and the *Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy* (1978). The model reflects the Evangelical logic of theologising, in which affirming something implies negating what is not in line with what has been affirmed. What is even more important is that the wise combination of “yes” and “no” is particularly vital for Evangelicals as they confront the ecumenical movement in general and Roman Catholicism in particular. This procedure is very far from the ecumenical (or Roman Catholic!) pattern in which two or more parties can uphold something together but are not constrained to work through the implications of what they have affirmed in an evangelically coherent way. Moreover, as will indicated later, the Roman Catholic epistemological framework is characterised by a comprehensive et-et (both-and) pattern which enables it to hold together things which are different. The introduction of the “denial” element in GJC contrasts with this Catholic sensitivity towards the catholicity of doctrine. A Roman Catholic theologian would perhaps subscribe to the “affirmation” sections of GJC but would feel extremely uncomfortable, if not totally uneasy, with the “denial” parts, especially nn. 1, 12, 13, 14 on issues like the authority of the Church, justification as infusion of righteousness, the role of works and human cooperation with grace. Unlike ECT and GOS, GJC goes in the right direction in stressing the essential link between the “yes” and the “no” of the gospel evangelically interpreted. The misunderstanding caused by the previous documents should teach an important

lesson in this respect, that is the need for Evangelicals to relearn to say their Evangelical “no” (together with the “yes”, of course!) in ecumenical encounters when the truth of the gospel is under scrutiny. “No” is part of their theological identity just as much as “yes” and makes it possible to avoid dangerous ambiguities. The hope is that the content, the pattern and the ethos of GJC will prove to be an useful reference point for future Evangelical endeavours in the ecumenical scene.

CHAPTER FIVE

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPRAISAL (I): THE PROBLEM OF AN EVANGELICAL HERMENEUTIC OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

The different kinds of analysis that Evangelical theology has produced on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism have been descriptively assessed in the preceding sections of this thesis. The most significant contributions both from the work of individual theologians and from the results of a number of Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogues have been presented in their basic theological contours and historical setting. Such an approach has underlined the variety of theological viewpoints and methodological perspectives at work within Evangelical theology at large in confronting Roman Catholicism in the years following the Second Vatican Council. Not only does the plurality of Evangelical voices reflect the theological diversity which exists within the Evangelical movement at large, but also points out the multiplicity of perspectives which Roman Catholicism can offer to the external observer, be it a sociologist, a historian or a theologian.

If we leave behind analysis of particulars in order to concentrate our attention on broader theological considerations regarding theological method and insight, it is vitally important to be aware of the whole question of interpretation in any attempt to come to grips with Roman Catholicism. It may be a truism – though it is certainly true - to say that the way it is approached heavily conditions the way it is understood. Thus, a crucial set of critical comments that can be elaborated in assessing the evangelical perspectives on Roman Catholicism revolves around hermeneutical strategies and interpretative frameworks. Before assessing the possible merits and weaknesses of the evangelical attempts at interpretation presented earlier, what would seem to be a fruitful hermeneutical model will be sketched in its essential profile. Interpreting interpretations needs an interpretative key in order to make ~~it~~ interpretation itself possible. This over-all interpretative framework will provide the background against which critical remarks on the evangelical theological perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism will be developed.

5.1 THINKING ROMAN CATHOLICISM AS A SYSTEM

Roman Catholicism calls for interpretation. Given the impossibility of hermeneutic neutrality, the attempt to construct an appropriate, adequate theological hermeneutic is an absolute necessity in order to grasp its essential contours. If no hermeneutical awareness is used or if it is totally inadequate, the whole enterprise of approaching Roman Catholicism will fall prey either to ridiculous prejudices or to the use of implausible categories. Recognising the need for an interpretative framework is only the first step. The second more important step has to do with the shape which the model ought to have. In this respect, the reality of Roman Catholicism should have prominence in that it should determine the fundamental outlook. In order to give help in understanding the basics of Roman Catholicism, an interpretative model would need to single out the fundamental aspects of Roman Catholicism as a unified whole while, at the same time, accounting for its vast phenomenology. In fact, Roman Catholicism is both unity and diversity. The starting point for the construction of such a model should be the interface between unity and multiplicity, centre and periphery, movements and institution, history of the past and projection towards the future which are all basic elements in the catholic universe. A penetrating insight into Catholicism must take into account its doctrine, culture, history and institutions and should aim at uniting the different elements into a coherent whole. Only a model which matches these aims is, in the end, capable of producing an interpretation of Roman Catholicism which is both analytical and synthetic. Without such a combined effort, the stress will either be put on the Roman element (i.e. the analytical aspect) or on the Catholic one (the synthetic aspect), neglecting therefore the synergy between the two which makes Roman Catholicism what it is.

Roman Catholicism can be thought of in terms of a system. It follows that an adequate approach to Roman Catholicism must be systemic, i.e. an approach that interprets it as a system. The word system has a long history and a wide spectrum of usages in almost every scientific field. It is essential therefore to indicate in which sense the metaphor can be employed theologically and, more specifically, in relation to Roman Catholicism. Three approaches will be used in order to support the viability of such a proposal and to suggest the limits of its scope. The first will be mainly historical and will try to relate the use of the category of system as applied to Roman Catholicism to the thought of Abraham Kuyper as expressed in his 1898 Princeton Lectures on Calvinism. The second approach will be comparative in nature

and will attempt to present some modern, contemporary catholic reflections on the idea of Catholicism itself which would seem to indicate basic agreement with the category of system. The third approach will be a constructive effort which will try to delineate the theoretical thrust of the category of system with reference to Roman Catholicism.

5.1.1 Roman Catholicism as a “Life-System”

The task of shaping a feasible interpretative model in order to approach Roman Catholicism must be historically conscious and theologically alert. Before venturing into the presentation of the profile of the interpretation of Roman Catholicism as a system, the researcher is obliged to indicate his sources and the legacy to which he is indebted. The systemic approach is not a novelty in the history of evangelical theology. It has been quite consistently used in the brand of Dutch Calvinism associated with the name and work of Abraham Kuyper. It is necessary to turn to his work in attempting to appraise Roman Catholicism as a system from an evangelical viewpoint and from within the evangelical tradition. Any attempt to move beyond Kuyper in this respect, has to nonetheless come to terms with him in this specific domain. If an evangelical hermeneutic is to be moulded on the manifold reality of Catholicism itself, it must also start within the broadly defined tradition of thought which can be called evangelical. Kuyper’s insights on worldviews as conflicting systems of thought match both criteria.

5.1.1.1 “Life-system” in Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism*

Kuyper’s work is wide and profound in itself and has contributed significantly in shaping a whole trend of thought usually called Neo-Calvinism. In recent years, there has been a resurgence in interest in Kuyper whose contribution cannot be exaggerated. Solid theologian, vigorous academic, able politician, brilliant journalist, Kuyper appears as a giant in recent evangelical protestant history. His influence on many domains, from theology proper to political thought, from philosophy of science to educational policies and beyond, is overarching and can still be felt in many areas of the world today. Current studies on Kuyper have been given some impetus by the centenary of an event which represents the peak of his intellectual career: the Stone Lectures on Calvinism delivered at Princeton Theological Seminary in 1898, subsequently published in a single volume. The importance of these Lectures can

hardly be overstated: in fact, they can be considered as the most “complete, cogent, and visionary expression” of the central themes of his earlier writing.¹ Since a true “manifesto of Kuyperian Calvinism” is outlined there, they are therefore an extremely helpful vantage point from which it is possible to appreciate the overall orientation of his thought. It is important to refer to these lectures in attempting to delineate an evangelical perspective on Roman Catholicism. In outlining his understanding of Calvinism as a life-system, Kuyper considers Roman Catholicism as a competing life-system, thus providing some raw but significant insights that will have to be developed more comprehensively into a systemic approach. The critical reading of other elements of Kuyper’s analysis, e.g. his unnuanced description of Modernism, his ideological interpretation of the French Revolution, his progressive view of historical development, would certainly deserve consideration but would nonetheless diverge from the focus of this chapter.

In his Princeton lectures, Kuyper sketches out his concept of Calvinism as an all-embracing life-system or worldview. The main reason why Kuyper develops his argument in this way is twofold: on the one hand, Calvinism is considered as a historical force which cannot be kept within the confines of religion alone, though it began as a theological rediscovery which led to an ecclesiastical reform and has developed into a comprehensive system of thought. On the other hand, Kuyper is convinced that, at the turn of the century, the world is witnessing a violent struggle, a “mortal combat”,² between the thought-world of Christianity (which Kuyper tends to use as a synonym for Calvinism while acknowledging the reality of other confessional expressions of Christianity)³ and Modernism, the newest form of Paganism, which is an antithetical system with a similar universal scope but with a completely different ideological thrust. According to Kuyper, this is “the struggle in

¹ Heslam, *Creating a Christian Worldview* (1998) 11. Heslam’s work is a masterful analysis of the context and content of the Lectures. The following insights into Kuyper’s view of “system” are heavily indebted to Heslam’s careful, critical reading of the Lectures. Important background readings on Kuyper are van der Kroef (1948), Jellema (1957), Bratt (1984) and (1996). On his legacy, especially as far as the American context is concerned, cf. Bolt, *A Free Church, A Holy Nation* (2001) and Lugo, *Religion, Pluralism, and Public Life* (2000).

² *Lectures on Calvinism* (1931) 11.

³ Kuyper considers Calvinism as the most comprehensive form of Protestantism and the most consistent expression of Christianity, indeed its highest one. On p. 17, he maintains that “Calvinism claims to embody the Christian idea more purely and accurately than could Romanism and Lutheranism”.

Europe” and also in America where he is delivering his lectures.⁴ His apologetical intention is thus to delineate the distinct, comprehensive character of Calvinism for every sphere of life and also show that Calvinism, understood in this way, is utterly incompatible with Modernism against which it is engaged in a fierce ideological battle.

The first Lecture, in particular, spells out Kuyper’s understanding of the meaning of the term “life-system” and the basic contours of the Calvinistic worldview, while the following lectures attempt to apply its far-reaching implications to different areas such as religion, politics, science and art. The key ideas conveyed at Princeton are aptly summarised by Heslam when he writes that, for Kuyper, Calvinism “represented a broad movement in society and culture, not restricted to the Church or doctrine; that it emanated outwards from its central source in the religious consciousness; that this religious consciousness represented the purest and most advanced stage in the development of religion; and that Calvinism offered the best prospects for the future of Christianity”.⁵ In order to go on to apply a somewhat refined “life-system” concept to Roman Catholicism, it is important to underline some significant aspects of Kuyper’s understanding of Calvinism as a worldview.

According to Kuyper and the brand of Calvinism associated with him, Calvinism itself is not merely a theological construction or a historical confession, not is it simply an ecclesiastical denomination. While all these dimensions help to define the term Calvinism, fundamentally, has a broader scope and denotes, in Bavinck’s words, a “specific character and a distinct physiognomy” not only in theological matters and Church polity but also “in social and political life, in science and art”.⁶ Moving beyond sectarian, confessional, or denominational definitions, Calvinism “as a *scientific* name”⁷ is the historical attempt to implement calvinian and calvinistic thought in every aspect of life and in various contexts while updating its profile according to different developments and circumstances. At this point, the category of “life-system” comes to the fore. In fact, at the beginning of the first lecture, Kuyper argues that Calvinism can be viewed philosophically as a “system of

⁴ *Lectures on Calvinism*, 11 (italics in the original).

⁵ Heslam (1998) 255.

⁶ Herman Bavinck, “The Future of Calvinism”, *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 17 (1894) 3, quoted by Heslam, 87.

⁷ *Lectures on Calvinism*, 14 (italics in the original).

conceptions",⁸ theistically construed in line with the Reformed tradition and applicable to every domain of life. In this respect, he approvingly quotes historian Robert Fuin who states that Calvinism consists of "a logical system of divinity, of a democratic Church-order of its own, impelled by a severely moral sense, and as enthusiastic for moral as for the religious reformation of mankind", or again the *History of the United States of America* (1882-1884) by George Bancroft where it is written that "Calvinism ... has a theory of ontology, of ethics, of social happiness, and of human liberty, all derived from God".⁹ In this all-embracing definition which appears to be wholeheartedly accepted by Kuyper, Calvinism is a holistic perspective on the world which functions as the reference point for thinking and living for those who adhere to it. In the course of the Lectures, he often refers to the term "life-system" as connoting Calvinism in the widest sense possible but also in its most precise way. The crucial importance of it is shown by the fact that it appears in the title of the first lecture as if to indicate the basic nature of the kind of Calvinism he is advocating. After gathering insights from other authors regarding the broad notion of Calvinism, Kuyper is able to offer his "scientific" one which is perfectly compatible with the former: Calvinism is "an independent general tendency, which from a mother principle of its own, has developed an independent form both for our *life* and for our *thought*".¹⁰

The category of "life-system" is not Kuyper's invention nor does it belong to his peculiar language. In fact, Kuyper explicitly admits that "life-system" is a tentative English translation of the German *Weltanschauung* and must be understood as equivalent to it. The genealogy of the term and its semantic value comes from the German language and thought. The history of the word-concept *Weltanschauung* is fascinating and can be traced back to Kant who coined it and also to the German Idealist and Romantic traditions which made it a key word of a whole ethos of thought.¹¹ Around the turn of the XX century, it was diffusely (often) used by

⁸ Ibidem.

⁹ The two quotations are taken from *Lectures on Calvinism*, 14-15.

¹⁰ Idem, 15 (italics in the original).

¹¹ On the history of the word and its usage in Kuyper and the Dutch Reformed tradition, cf. Olthuis, "On Worldviews" (1989) and Wolters, "Dutch Neo-Calvinism" (1983) and "On the Idea of Worldview and Its Relation to Philosophy" (1989). Beside its German main derivation, Heslam also mentions the influence exerted on Kuyper by James Orr's 1890-91 Kerr Lectures subsequently published as *The Christian View of God and the World as Centring in the Incarnation*, where Orr argues that Christianity has a "world-view of its own": cf. Heslam, 93-95. The

Rickert, Windelband and Dilthey to denote “a set of beliefs that underlie and shape all human thought and action”.¹² Though aware of the fact that it had relativistic overtones in its German origin, Kuyper appropriated the term for his own use and, after a process of semantic refinement as his thinking required a more fitting category for his own idea of Calvinism, he employed it extensively throughout the Stone Lectures but also prior to Princeton as well as in his subsequent massive work.¹³ The Princeton Lectures mark the point where Kuyper speaks of “life-system” in a “deliberate and specific way” to indicate one of the foundational pillars of “his entire body of thought”¹⁴ as far as Calvinism is concerned but also with regard to his analyses on competing ideological forces. So close is the relationship of the concept of *Weltanschauung* to Kuyper, that his thought would be utterly incomprehensible without reference to it. Having said that, a word of caution is necessary. In fact, notwithstanding the title given to the first lecture and its considerable length, Kuyper does not provide a rigorous definition of what he means by “life-system”. There are some glimpses and partial insights but not an accurately carved definition. On the whole, it is nonetheless possible to discern the main thrust of his understanding of *Weltanschauung* even without a fully spelt out theory of a “life-system”.

Consciously writing in the Kuyperian tradition, Wolters defines a worldview in a way that Kuyper would have certainly endorsed, that is as “the comprehensive framework of one’s basic beliefs about things”.¹⁵ The contours of this kind of definition are rather loose so as to accommodate the idea of wholeness of one’s own perspective on the world. Such idea of broadness and inclusiveness conveyed in the expression “life-system” appears to be closer to Kuyper’s concerns than a more analytical argumentation of the same concept. What is clear is that “life-system” is the pre-scientific framework which informs ontology, epistemology, ethics, etc., and is responsible for their basic orientation. In Kuyper’s view, a “life-system” pertains to all human beings and social groupings and is not just for philosophically

similarities between Kuyper and Orr are striking but the main source for Kuyper’s concept is the German *Weltanschauung*, as Heslam acknowledges too. For a general introduction to the idea of worldview, cf. Holmes, *Contours of a Worldview* (1983).

¹² Heslam, 89.

¹³ For Kuyper’s use of the term worldview prior to the Stone Lectures, cf. Bratt, “In the Shadow of Mt. Kuyper” (1996) 63-64. In turn, Bratt refers to R.D. Henderson, “How Abraham Kuyper Became a Kuyperian”, *Christian Scholars’ Review* 22/1 (1992) 31-32, 35 for further evidence.

¹⁴ Heslam, 92.

¹⁵ Wolters, *Creation Regained* (1985) 2.

sophisticated people. In that, it differs significantly from the concept of a broadly defined philosophy. A “life-system” is not necessarily argued for theoretically but it is always lived out practically; even in different degrees of consciousness and levels of consistency, it is always operative in shaping behaviour, choices and projects. With regard to the concept of *Weltanschauung* roughly borrowed from the German, Kuyper qualifies his own interpretation by stressing its derivation from a single overarching principle which not only permeates the whole life-system but also every expression of it. The conviction that each life-system has a distinct and inalienable central core which is its “principle” is presented using a rich vocabulary which conveys many different shades of meaning. In fact, Kuyper speaks of “mother-principle”, “mother-thought”, “life-principle”, “principle” without further adjectival connotations, “well-defined principle” and also “inflexible principle”.¹⁶ The basic idea is that each life-system revolves around a certain, specific and fundamental principle and can be identified with it. So inherent is the principle to the system that the battle between Christianity and Modernism is simply a fight in which “*principle* must be arrayed against *principle*”.¹⁷ A life-system is contained *in nuce* in its principle whereas the principle thoroughly innervates the system. Each principle has its own profile which determines the whole framework of a system. For instance, Kuyper compares and contrasts Calvin and Luther in terms of different principles at work in their life and thought. In this respect, Calvin is identified with the “general cosmological principle of the sovereignty of God” whereas Luther is thought of as holding the “special-soteriological principle of a justifying faith”.¹⁸ Both adhere to the same “reformatory principle” but Calvin’s starting point is “objective, cosmological” while Luther’s is “subjective, anthropological”. For Kuyper, their differences can all be seen in their respective principles. The principle is not necessarily articulated as a singular noun; a principle can be made from “principles” which are so interwoven that they erect a single system and therefore a unified principle. Calvinism, for example, being the most advanced stage of Christianity is said to be “an all-embracing system of principles”,¹⁹ thus allowing both the possibility of a singular connotation and a plural one. Here again, the idea of

¹⁶ *Lectures on Calvinism*, 15 (“mother-principle”); 26 (“mother-thought”); 17 (“life-principle”); 18,22,39 (“principle” as such); 32 (“well-defined principle”); 40 (“inflexible principle”).

¹⁷ *Idem*, 11 (italics in the original).

¹⁸ *Idem*, 22.

principle is not rigorously defined but more generically evoked and described in many different ways. Using a different metaphor, Kuyper makes reference to another aspect of a principle: in other words, a principle can be thought of in terms of a “starting point” or a “sharply-defined starting point”²⁰ in which the subsequent direction of the system is already fully displayed. Principle, principles, starting point: these all point to the decisive as well as unitary element of a given system.

A further step is necessary in order to come to grips with Kuyper’s life-system concept. In the first Lecture, Kuyper argues that each system has to match some “*conditions*”²¹ in order to be considered as such. It is not clear what relationship there is between these conditions and the above mentioned idea of principle, but the cumulative evidence seems to indicate that the former are part of the latter in the sense that conditions help to shape the overall principle and are an essential ingredient of it. Beyond that connection, for a system to be a system, according to Kuyper, it has to address “the three fundamental relations of all human life: (1) our relation *to God*, (2) our relation *to man*, and (3) our relation *to the world*”.²² The way a system envisages and articulate these relations appears to be the principle of the life-system itself. The sequential order of the relations is not interchangeable in that the one with regard to God is of fundamental importance for all other relationships. A system’s principle has therefore a threefold ramification by which it addresses the fundamental issues involved in a worldview. By way of sampling the viability of an interpretative key as such, Kuyper presents the differences between the systems of Paganism, Islamism, Romanism, Lutheranism and Calvinism by underlining the divergent answers that each system gives to the above-mentioned fundamental questions. On the whole, Kuyper’s concept of life-system as it is chiefly applied to Calvinism, while involving some linguistic ambiguity and a lack of semantic precision, is nonetheless a penetrating interpretative tool which could help to form the basis for an evangelical hermeneutic of Roman Catholicism. Before moving towards this purpose, it might be useful to reflect on Kuyper’s view of Roman Catholicism itself and his direct application of the life-system approach to what he often calls “Romanism”.

¹⁹ Idem, 19.

²⁰ Idem, 19,20,23 and 31 respectively.

²¹ Idem, 19 (*italics in the original*).

²² Ibidem (*italics in the original*).

5.1.1.2 Kuyper's View of Roman Catholicism as a "Life-System"

In the 1898 Stone Lectures Kuyper faces the task of framing an apologetical presentation of Calvinism making use of the idea of life-system as an appropriate way of depicting its broad scope. As has been already argued, the Lectures not only introduce Calvinism in itself but seek to present Calvinism as a life-system in the midst of other life-systems which claim a place on the world scene. It is one of the life-system options that are set before mankind at the beginning of the Twentieth century. In this sense, Calvinism "stands in line with those other great *complexes* of human life, known as Paganism, Islamism and Romanism, by which we distinguish four entirely different worlds in the one collective world of human life".²³ In Kuyper's analysis of the contemporary situation, the Western world witnesses a dramatic confrontation especially between *redivivus* Paganism in the vestiges of the Modernist movement and sustained by the ideological framework of the French Revolution and Christianity of which Calvinism is the most highly evolved expression. Besides sketching the battle field and singling out the main actors involved, Kuyper suggests a brief interpretation of each life-system employing the same categories used for Calvinism. In particular, it is important to assess his presentation of Romanism as a life-system.

Together with Calvinism, Romanism shares the marks of a life-system on its own and there are several defining elements in its principle(s) according to Kuyper. In fact, "it has embodied its life-thought in a world of conceptions and utterances entirely its own",²⁴ while creating a "form of its own for human society".²⁵ Moreover, contrary to the different branches of Protestantism which are characterised by significant multiformity, Romanism has retained and enjoyed a conspicuous degree of unity due to its ecclesiastical institution whose prominence makes it possible to call it "the papal system".²⁶ The preservation of its unity is mainly attributable to the function of "its hierarchy" which maintains uniformity between the various components and warrants it among its adherents. While describing the Roman system, Kuyper shows great respect and even admiration for it, especially for the "marvelous energy" displayed in the second half of XIX century, the "exhaustive

²³ Idem, 17 (italics in the original)

²⁴ Ibidem.

²⁵ Idem, 21.

²⁶ Idem, 38.

studies of Romish philosophy” and Rome’s “successful efforts in social life”.²⁷ Even in the domain of practical expressions of spirituality, Kuyper readily acknowledges that “in Christian works and devotion Rome still outstrips us”.²⁸ Apart from his appreciation of the merits of Vatican Romanism, Kuyper thinks that the best the system can achieve in terms of cultural and social life can be seen not in the countries where it is the controlling majority but in those where it stands as a vibrant minority. In the former (Kuyper mentions Latin America and Southern Europe), Romanism is in decline whereas in the latter (e.g. North Germany, Holland, England and United States of America), it displays its “noble, energetic traits” under the enthusiastic leadership of capable men like Manning, Wiseman, Von Ketteler and Windthorst.²⁹ Among the life-system options of his current situation, Romanism is often taken into consideration by Kuyper as a respectable yet opposing worldview for Calvinism.

When it comes to the presentation of the “conditions” of the Roman system, Kuyper highlights his understanding of its composite and overarching principle. On the subject of man’s relationship to God, whereas Calvinism argues that God enters into immediate fellowship with the creature as God the Holy Spirit, Romanism answers that God does it “by *means of a mystic middle-link* which is the Church”, in such a way that Church as a visible institution “stands *between* God and the world” and thus a “*mediate communion*” is established”.³⁰ The concept of the mediation of the Church plays a fundamental role in shaping Kuyper’s understanding of the way Catholicism solves the paramount question of the relation between God and the

²⁷ Without mentioning it, Kuyper may be alluding to the Syllabus against Modernism by Pius IX and the strong opposition of that pope to ideological Modernism in general. As for Romish philosophy, the reference may indicate Kuyper’s interest in the renewed impetus in Thomistic studies at that time. Moreover, as far as social achievements are concerned, he may be alluding to Leo XIII’s social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). In this respect, Heslam quotes a 1891 work by Kuyper (*Het sociale vraagstuk en de christelijke religie*) where he writes: “It must be recognized, to our shame, that Roman Catholics are far ahead of us in the study of the social question, *very far ahead*”; cf. Heslam, 235.

²⁸ *Lectures on Calvinism*, 188.

²⁹ *Idem*, 185.

³⁰ *Idem*, 21 (italics in the original). In Kuyper’s view, Paganism seeks God *in* the creature whereas Islamism isolates God *from* the creature. Lutheranism shares the Calvinist idea of immediate communion while retaining secondary elements of the mediatory role of the Church. Kuyper comes back to the issue of whether religion operates “*directly*” or “*mediately*” in the second lecture on “Calvinism and religion”; cf. *Lectures on Calvinism*, 43, 47-49.

world. As for the second condition, i.e. the relation of man to man, whereas Calvinism does not recognise any divinely imposed distinction between men and therefore encourages a basically democratic ethos, Romanism interprets it “*hierarchically*”,³¹ thus promoting an aristocratic orientation of life where a Church or social ladder is always present. Mediation and hierarchy are closely related in the Roman conception of communion with God, the nature of the Church and social life. The third condition has to do with the relation to the world. Here again, because of its sense of immediacy and equality, Calvinism causes the Church to recede from its position of power and sees the world as a place to live in for the sake of God’s glory. For Romanism, instead, the world is either “overshadowed by the Church” and placed “under ecclesiastical guardianship” or, if the Church does not succeed in putting the world under her wings, set over against the Church and cursed.³² The attitude fostered by the Roman articulation of the relation is either ecclesiastical dominion over the world or monastic flight from it. Because of this unresolved tension in Catholic dealings with the world, Kuyper can refer to Romanism as a “dualistic system”³³ in the sense that the Roman Church has fostered a “partial” view of religion, acknowledging religion “only as it existed in her own Church” and considering its influence “to be confined to that portion of life which she had consecrated”.³⁴ Since Romanism draws the lines between “consecrated” and “profane” aspects of life, it stands in sharp contrast to the unitary principle of Calvinism according to which the whole creation must give glory to God.

Kuyper’s insights go further than just comparing and contrasting different life-systems which participate in the ideological battle rekindled by the raise of Modernism. In the course of the Lectures, he also essays his evolutionary view of the historical process as far as the history of religious systems is concerned. In terms of the “principal phases in the general development of our human race”,³⁵ Paganism, Islamism, Romanism and Calvinism are not only the competitor systems of his days but they also represent subsequent stages of the historical development of life-

³¹ Idem, 26-27 (italics in the original).

³² Idem, 29-30.

³³ Idem, 52.

³⁴ Idem, 51. In this respect, Kuyper sees a qualified expression of the Roman “dualistic system” in the praxis of Carnival where “a fair chance” is given to the flesh, followed by the weeks of Lent where religion is given “a full sway over the soul”: idem, 52.

³⁵ Idem, 34.

systems. In this developmental view of the universal history of ideas, coming after the three above-mentioned “successive formations”, Calvinism is the peak of the process of organic growth in terms of “the completed evolution of Protestantism” and a “higher and richer stage of human development”.³⁶ According to this Kuyperian scheme, Romanism is deemed to be as a transitory phase with regard to the further move promoted by Calvinism which has definitely surpassed it. In Kuyper’s words: “Rome’s world and life-view represents an older and hence lower stage of development in the history of mankind”,³⁷ and because of that any hope in the Roman system as the leading force of the Western world would be an anti-historical, backwardly oriented trust.³⁸ Against the resurgent Paganism disguised in the form of Modernism, only Calvinism as the most evolved and lively life-system can resolutely face the challenge of defending and advancing the cause of Christianity.

After gathering the main elements of Kuyper’s multifaceted approach to Roman Catholicism presented in the Stone Lectures, it is possible to consider more precisely the way in which he envisages Calvinism’s posture vis-à-vis Romanism. Historically, Kuypers argues, Calvinism made its appearance “by the side of Romanism, and in opposition to it”.³⁹ Its origins can be traced back to a breach of the Roman system which produced a movement against it. Ecclesiastically, Calvinism created “a different Church-form” and, because it presented itself as a life-system proper, its reformatory principle infiltrated the wider socio-cultural level, producing “an entirely different form of human life”, “a different method of existence” animated by “different ideals and conceptions”.⁴⁰ Before such a clear picture, the divergences in terms of the respective life-systems are not underestimated by Kuyper; in fact, he pushes his analysis to the point of indicating the existence of “a

³⁶ Idem, 41. Cf. also p. 38. Before being overcome by Calvinism, Romanism had absorbed and rielaborated former “potencies”, i.e. Israel’s priesthood, the cross of Calvary and the world organization of the Roman empire; cf. idem, 33.

³⁷ Idem, 186.

³⁸ On the whole question of the role of Romanism at the turn of the century, cf. idem, 184-187.

³⁹ Idem, 17. The term “opposition” is also found where Kuyper argues that Calvinism dismissed the Church as the mediator between the soul and God; cf. idem, 21.

⁴⁰ Idem, 17. Later, in the same vein Kuyper writes that Calvinism has wrought “an entire change in the world of thoughts and conceptions”, 29-30 and that it has implanted “another principle in the human heart” and disclosed “another world of thought to the human mind”, 39-40.

fundamental antithesis between Rome and ourselves".⁴¹ The specification of the fact that there is something fundamentally different between the two life-systems would indicate that the antithesis could be thought of in terms of principle(s), conditions, fundamental ways of thinking about religion and interpreting life: the overall orientation of the Calvinist life-system stands in antithesis to that of Romanism. Unfortunately, Kuyper does not elaborate on this point in the sense that it does not deepen the thrust of the statement related to the supposed antithesis. When he comes to delineate its dimensions, he seems cautiously to avoid enlarging the significance of the previously asserted "fundamental antithesis". What he does is to evoke the historical and doctrinal "controversy" between Calvinism and Romanism on "ecclesiastical hierarchy", "man's nature before and after the Fall", "justification", "the mass", "the invocation of saints and angels", "the worship of images", and "purgatory". On these issues, whose list of contentious points is not exhaustive because it could include "many others", Kuyper argues that Calvinism unflinchingly opposes Romanism, while both have in common the "fundamentals of our Christian creed".⁴² The impression gathered from this part of Kuyper's Lectures is that, notwithstanding the somewhat innovative and fertile analysis in terms of life-system and antithesis, the expectations raised by it do not match with the reiteration of the traditional confessional dispute inherited from the XVI century in the context of the commonly shared classical heritage of Christian doctrine. The promising premise, i.e. the interpretation of Romanism as a life-system, is not developed consistently and only seems to lead to the traditional *cahier de doléances* coupled with the acknowledgement of a common creedal basis. This is, however, only one side of the coin as far as Kuyper's posture before Catholicism is concerned. There is another set of considerations which could help in coming to terms with Kuyper's lack of consistency here. As has been inferred earlier, his main concern is not the struggle against Romanism but against Modernism. In his view, the "power of Rome is all the while decreasing"⁴³ and, because of its historically less developed form of life-system, Romanism is not and will not be the chief antagonist for Calvinism in the future. The old controversy does not contain "the points on which the struggle of the

⁴¹ Idem, 183. For an introductory survey on the concept of "antithesis" in Kuyper and Neo-Calvinism, cf. Jacob Klapwijk, "Antithesis and Common Grace" (1991).

⁴² *Lectures on Calvinism*, 183.

⁴³ Idem, 186.

age is concentrated”,⁴⁴ not because they have suddenly lost importance, but because the contingent situation indicates to Kuyper that “the lines of the battle” are entirely different. The most demanding battle, in fact, has to be fought against the newer form of Paganism which is assaulting the very core of a Christian worldview. If the ideological enemy of the day is Modernism, Kuyper is convinced that Calvinism should vigorously invest all its energies in that conflict while looking for any ally who could engage in a common opposition to it. At this point,^{HAVING} considered “Rome’s warfare against Atheism and Pantheism” which had been significantly expressed in the second half of XIX century, Kuyper can assert that Rome itself “is not an antagonist, but stands on our side” in the “skilful battle against the same tendency”.⁴⁵ The basis for co-operation resides precisely in the identification of the same contrasting force and is rooted in the same broadly defined Christian heritage. At Princeton, while arguing for a kind of ideological analysis of history and religion capable of taking into account the life-system dimension of Romanism and Calvinism which poses them in “fundamental antithesis”, Kuyper demonstrates nonetheless “his pragmatism in striving towards specific social and political goals”⁴⁶ together with Catholics when it comes to engaging in “mortal combat” against the modern spirit.

5.1.2 Towards a Systemic Approach to Roman Catholicism

In his 1898 Stone *Lectures on Calvinism*, Kuyper has provided a general introduction to his stimulating thought which is, among many others, one of the main sources of inspiration for contemporary evangelicalism. Leaving aside other significant impulses which have fertilised other domains like the arts, education, science and politics, the focus has been singled out in Kuyper’s use of the category of life-system as applied to Calvinism but also to Romanism and other religious/ideological orientations of life and thought. This particular analytical perspective has been borrowed from the German tradition and then adapted to Kuyper’s presuppositions and purposes so as to become the key feature of Kuyper’s methodological and epistemological effort when confronted with the main worldviews of his time. Life-

⁴⁴ Idem, 183.

⁴⁵ Idem, 183-184.

⁴⁶ Cf. Heslam, 236-237. It should not be forgotten that in later years (1901-1905), Kuyper eventually became Prime Minister of a coalition government in which his

system appears to be a suitable category for interpreting Roman Catholicism without reducing it to one or more of its constitutive elements, thus losing sight of the oneness of its essence. A systemic approach to Roman Catholicism finds its starting point in Kuyper's category of life-system. The linguistic similarity is just an accidental point of convergence. What matters most is the idea conveyed in the expression, i.e. a worldview comprehensive in character and unitary in scope, stemming from a set of principles which derive from the answers that are given to the fundamental questions of life and which determines the ideals that qualify its project. Kuyper's merit in modern Protestant circles is that he attempted to carry out a kind of analysis of movements in history which relates presuppositions and achievements and points to the reality of the interconnections within the system between its various parts. In this Kuyperian line, a systemic approach would consider Roman Catholicism as a life-system, having its own principle(s) and programmatic profile.

Working out the task of interpreting Catholicism in such a way does not mean endorsing Kuyper uncritically at this pivotal point. As has already been argued earlier on, his life-system is simply a useful starting point in order to shape an evangelical hermeneutics of Roman Catholicism which is nonetheless in need of critical refinement for at least three reasons. Firstly, the Kuyperian conceptuality is only evoked, roughly sketched out, but not fully spelt out coherently and comprehensively. There are important areas which are somewhat ambiguous in conceptual and linguistic terms. The frequent interchange of words without a careful definition of the terms makes it difficult to think of a principle in the singular or principles in the plural; moreover, it blurs the distinction between "principle" and "condition" allowing some confusing overlaps. It might be true that a lecture is not necessarily a scientific essay but more conceptual precision and linguistic rigour is perhaps needed in order to deal with a complex reality like Roman Catholicism. Secondly, and most importantly, the Kuyperian proposal contained in the *Lectures* is not always consistent as far as the relationship between the theoretical premise and the pragmatic outcome is concerned. While the analysis of the first address is conducted according to the life-system approach and, as a coherent result, it envisages a "fundamental antithesis" between Calvinism and Romanism, the concluding lecture moves on the basis of other concerns and principles, mainly

Anti-Revolutionary Party made an alliance with the Dutch Roman Catholic National Party.

nurtured by the awareness of the fierce battle against Modernism and the pressing need for a coalition between Christian forces. It seems that the established “antithesis” gradually loses its sharpness and therefore it is not properly an antithesis, or at least, it is an antithesis of a kind which is not specified. Further than that, Kuyper’s repetition of the list of controversial points suggests that the life-system analysis has not been taken to its reasonable conclusion but has been infiltrated by the more traditionally attested atomistic, fragmented view. A systemic approach, on the contrary, needs to strive for a more sustained coherence with regard to the crucial aspects of its interpretative perspective. If it is systemic, it has to reflect a systemic discernment and acuteness from the beginning to the end, from principles to practicalities. Finally, there is another apparent weakness in the *Lectures* to deal with. Kuyper’s developmental view of the history of life-systems is theoretically debatable but, more poignantly than that, it has manifested itself as being essentially wrong. Contrary to Kuyper’s conviction, in the course of the XX century Romanism has not progressively lost its influence but, especially after the Second Vatican Council, has significantly expanded it on a world-wide scale to the point that, paradoxically, Roman Catholicism is perhaps the best equipped Christian system on the world scene to face the challenge of modernity and postmodernity. The inner vitality of Roman Catholicism was underestimated by Kuyper and needs to be accounted for in a systemic approach.

In the end, any evangelical attempt to address the issue of what is at stake with Roman Catholicism should look at Kuyper’s *Lectures on Calvinism* to receive methodological instruction and epistemological direction in order to construe a feasible alternative to the *cahier de doléances* type of approach. From a systemic viewpoint built on Kuyper’s insights concerning the life-system outlook of worldviews, Roman Catholicism can be thought of as being an institutionalised religious worldview which has been promoted throughout history by the ecclesiastical institution whose centre is the Vatican but which cannot be limited to the Vatican. Although there is considerable diversity in its forms of expression, Catholicism is a basically unitary reality whose underlying and interconnected tenets can be discerned in any instance of the system, though in different degrees and shapes. The category of system seems to fit Roman Catholicism as a whole and makes a coherent interpretation of it possible.

5.2 SIGNIFICANT ROMAN CATHOLIC INSIGHTS WHICH REINFORCE THE PLAUSIBILITY OF A SYSTEMIC APPROACH

The somewhat modified and integrated Kuyperian perspective on Roman Catholicism provides a useful starting point in search for a way to study the complex Roman Catholic universe from an evangelical perspective. The systemic view appears to account for the unique ability of Catholicism to hold together different aspects which are erected into a unified though multifaceted system which serves the catholic cause. Against the background of the proposed hermeneutical approach and in order to test it, it is perhaps useful to compare and contrast the analysis of Roman Catholicism as a system with some relevant perspectives coming from contemporary catholic theological tradition.

The main purpose of this comparison is to gain an insight into the vast realm of Roman Catholicism which is capable of indicating the degree of plausibility of what has been outlined as a preliminary interpretative approach in coming to terms with it. Of course, the reference to some eminent Catholic thinkers⁴⁷ will be limited to their works which are strictly related to the subject and will aim to highlight the main methodological points of their analyses without providing a thorough discussion of their understanding of Catholicism. The following remarks will aim at pointing out the compatibility of the interpretative models adopted in modern Catholic theology with respect to the here advocated systemic approach to Roman Catholicism. Perhaps the common idealistic philosophical background shared by Abraham Kuyper in his systemic analysis with many contemporary Catholic thinkers may indicate that the idealist tradition of thought is the common framework in which the employment of the category of system can make sense, notwithstanding the theological divergences between confessionally divided scholars. Yet, interpretative models with significant resemblances with the systemic approach have been used, not always rigorously argued for but often implicitly assumed, even by scholars not directly influenced by the idealist tradition but who have perceived Catholicism as a whole. The similarities are so numerous to allow such a preliminary comparison.

A more thorough and critical assessment of the works of the theologians who will be referred to would require an altogether different attention and space. The

⁴⁷ The selection of Catholic theologians, both pre- and post-Vatican II, who will be referred to is certainly arbitrary, even though not entirely at random. The section will not aim at exhaustiveness but at plausible representativeness of significant trends within modern Roman Catholicism.

point here is to insert the systemic approach elaborated by Kuyper in the wider context of briefly evoked Catholic analyses of Catholicism.

An Evangelical hermeneutics of Roman Catholicism has to be sensitive to the hermeneutical approaches proposed within Roman Catholicism itself, though, for obvious reasons, it cannot share the same degree of empathy. The question which has to be asked revolves around the issue of whether Catholic intellectuals share the sense of the interconnected whole when thinking of Roman Catholicism and what is deemed to be the most basic feature of the Roman Catholic whole. Different answers have been given as to what is the most fitting metaphor when it comes to denote the multi-dimensional Catholic universe. The shared assumption in each attempt is that Roman Catholicism is a complex unity, it really has a central core and its vast phenomenology expressed by it can be legitimately thought of in terms of this core element.

5.2.1 John Henry Newman

In his *Essay on the Development of Christian Doctrine*, Newman, while reflecting on different tests which should prove the genuine developments occurred in Roman Catholic Christianity, often uses the category of “system” with respect to the idea of a religious thought characterised by integrity based on distinct principles.⁴⁸ In particular, the reference to “system” aptly applies to Catholic doctrines which, taken as a whole, well epitomise the basic profile of a “system”. Newman argues that “the Catholic doctrines ... are members of one family, and suggestive, or correlative, or confirmatory, or illustrative of each other” (154). Roman Catholicism is, as a matter of fact, “one integral religion” (155) made of several beliefs but marked by wholeness and indivisibility: in other words, the “Catholic system” (433, 446). The organic relationship which unites all doctrines is stretched to the point that, if one is confronted with it, he “must accept the whole or reject the whole” (154). In Newman’s perspective as it is presented in the *Essay*, Roman Catholicism is a system not only in its merely theological dimension but also as a divinely appointed institution whose historical operations are directed by the divine Presence: in this sense, Newman speaks more specifically of the “Roman system” (366). Reference to the organic outlook of the Catholic system, combined with its developmental nature,

⁴⁸ e.g. *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, 135, 137, 156, 337, 369, 388, 396, 447, 449, 452.

is Newman's basic apologetical argument which can counteract Protestant accusations that indicate Roman Catholicism as a progressive corruption of the genuine Christian faith. On the contrary, since Christianity is innervated by a living and organic principle of development which is guaranteed by the authority of the ecclesial institution, Roman Catholicism is the "true development" of authentic Christianity. The systemic approach to Roman Catholicism finds in Newman's *Essay* a powerful example of a Catholic use of the category of "system" applied to the Roman Catholic religion.

5.2.2 Romano Guardini

In line with the German idealist and romantic traditions which were also the "humus" of much of Kuyper's thought, Guardini argues that Catholicism is a *Weltanschauung*, indeed the "katholische Weltanschauung". In the work that will become a sort of manifesto of his long teaching career as well as part of the name of his chair, Guardini outlines his understanding of worldview in terms of primary intuition and basic conceptualisation of the world. According to Guardini, the catholic worldview is not an ideology to be contrasted with others as if it were competing in an ideological struggle but is in itself an overall perspective marked by openness and universality towards the world. Since "the catholic element is not a type beside others", it "embraces all typical possibilities, as it embraces life itself".⁴⁹ It is a worldview on its own beyond ideology, perhaps a meta-ideology subsuming all ideological types. This aura of comprehensiveness - whose only adversary is negation - does not derive from a syncretistic attitude but from the catholic "original essential totality"⁵⁰ in its perspective on the whole world. In a telling sentence, Guardini forcefully links worldview and institution by saying that the Catholic *Weltanschauung* fits the Church because "she is the historical bearer of Christ's plenary view of the world".⁵¹ Because of Christ's unique inhabitation which permeates the Church, the Catholic *Weltanschauung* is "the Church's view of the world, in faith, from the point of view of the living Christ and in the fullness of its totality transcending any type".⁵² Apart from broader theological considerations on the relationship between Christ and the Church, what is important to underline here

⁴⁹ Guardini, *La visione cattolica del mondo*, 41-42.

⁵⁰ Ibidem.

⁵¹ Idem, 44.

⁵² Idem, 45.

is that the reference to the catholic intuition and conception of the world is not an “ideal-type” as if it were disembodied ideology but it is a worldview which is always related to the ecclesial institution which promotes and performs it and vice versa. In this respect, the Catholic *Weltanschauung* can also be articulated in systemic terms since the latter entail both fundamental aspects evoked by Guardini’s analysis (i.e. worldview and institution).

5.2.3 Hans Urs von Balthasar

Balthasar’s reflection on the “distinctively catholic”⁵³ can be thought of as belonging to the same stream of reflection to which Guardini contributed in his delineation of the profile of the Catholic *Weltanschauung*. The «incipit» of his work *In the Fullness of Faith* (“Catholic is a quality. It means totality and universality”)⁵⁴ is highly significant in that it lays the foundation for what follows in terms of the thoughtful presentation of Balthasar’s perspective on a qualitative interpretation of Catholicism. Here again, what pertains to the Church is seen as the “radiation” of divine totality and universality. In other words, because “Jesus is catholic” and “God’s love is catholic”,⁵⁵ the Church is also catholic in her intrinsic nature and in all her manifold expressions. All these pivotal aspects will have to be necessarily pondered elsewhere but what has to be stressed here is Balthasar’s perception of the Catholic Church as inherently imbued with “mission and structure”: in fact, since “it is the pure radiation of Christ and, in order to radiate, it must also be a structure. It is both in motion «away from itself» and abiding «in itself»”,⁵⁶ it reflects and embodies what a system is and how it operates. The co-essential compenetration of functional and ontological qualities and the virtuous intertwining of structural and missiological prerogatives makes the Catholic Church a unique subject which can be plausibly approached in systemic terms because they both safeguard the “totality and universality” of her worldview and take into account the structural outlook of its essence and project.

5.2.4 Avery Dulles

In a short study whose thrust is very close to the focus of this section, Dulles surveys different approaches that have been put forward in modern theology in attempting to

⁵³ Balthasar, *In the Fullness of Faith* (1988).

⁵⁴ Idem, 13.

⁵⁵ Idem, 27 and 31, respectively.

⁵⁶ Idem, 47.

reflect on “the meaning of Catholicism”, used to denote “a particular type or style of Christianity”.⁵⁷ His presentation of Protestant and Anglican perspectives, as well as Catholic ones, is enlightening and his “contemporary synthesis” relates Catholicism to the four attributes of the Church according to the Apostles’ Creed, showing that while Catholicism is nothing but Christianity, the Church of Christ is not “exclusively identical with its Roman Catholic realization”.⁵⁸ However, it is Dulles’s masterful treatment of the catholicity of the Church that points to what would appear to be a systemic picture of Catholicism itself.⁵⁹ After examining catholicity from “above” and “below”, in “breadth” and “length”, he analyses “the structures of catholicity” as well as indicating its “centre”, thus suggesting an overall interpretative perspective which takes into account different aspects and bringing them together in a coherent whole. Since worldview and institutions coinhere in the catholicity of the Church, the category of system can fit such a vast and nuanced reality.

5.2.5 Richard McBrien

In his massive, two-volume work simply but tellingly entitled *Catholicism*, McBrien provides a comprehensive analysis of the universe called Roman Catholicism in many of its qualifying dimensions. Reflecting on the question of “Catholicism’s distinctiveness”, McBrien argues that “nowhere else except in the Catholic Church are *all* of Catholicism’s characteristics present in the precise *configuration* in which they are found within Catholicism”.⁶⁰ The difference between Catholicism and other Christian ecclesial traditions can be thought of in terms of totality versus partiality, fullness versus lack, tendential wholeness versus latent selectivity. In McBrien’s words, Catholicism is “*comprehensive* and *all-embracing* toward the totality of Christian experience and tradition, in all the theological, doctrinal, spiritual, liturgical, canonical, institutional, and social richness and diversity of that experience and tradition”.⁶¹ The multifaceted totality which inheres Catholicism has to be related to the distinct configuration which such a comprehensiveness takes. The

⁵⁷ Dulles (1998).

⁵⁸ Idem, 69. Of course, Dulles here refers to LG 8.

⁵⁹ Dulles (1985). More in-depth interaction with this important work will be pursued in the second section of this chapter.

⁶⁰ McBrien (1980) 1172 (*italics in the original*). The main thrust of the two volumes is summarised in his article in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* (1987).

⁶¹ Ibidem (*italics in the original*).

catholic totality has nothing to do with a vague, indefinable entity but has a specific form, a precise structure and order. Even what McBrien singles out as the main theological foci of Catholicism, i.e. “sacramentality, mediation, communion”,⁶² with their assumption of the foundational combination of theological principles and instrumental institutions, gives further evidence for the feasibility of a systemic view.

Many of the Catholic scholars who have been briefly surveyed do not use the word “system” consistently and diffusely in their attempt to analyse the nature of Catholicism. Nonetheless, the idea of system, that is a living, complex, yet unitary whole having a distinct core and a professed goal, seems to be present and at work in catholic self-reflection and makes the use of the category of system plausible in the study of Roman Catholicism.

5.3 THE CATHOLICITY OF THE ROMAN CATHOLIC SYSTEM

Considering Roman Catholicism as a system is an approach which has been used in both the evangelical and the catholic traditions. Abraham Kuyper and the Dutch neo-calvinist tradition, on the one hand, and a number of contemporary and later Catholic theologians, on the other, use what is certainly a parallel and in some cases a convergent interpretative strategy in dealing with Roman Catholicism as a unified system. Both the vocabulary and the basic concepts used in these systemic analyses may be different but their hermeneutical cores clearly and significantly overlap. The indications gathered from both evangelical and catholic circles not only warrant but demand an approach to Catholicism which takes this paramount feature seriously to the extent of making it the guiding principle of the investigation. The issue at stake is a programmatic one: failing to adopt a systemically oriented evaluation or using it in an inconsistent way inevitably leads to a serious misunderstanding of the whole universe of Roman Catholicism. Having established this fundamental methodological premise, it is necessary to delineate the most important features of the catholic system going beyond what Kuyper called its “conditions” and “principles”. The very nature of Roman Catholicism calls for an approach which is aware that its system is both multifaceted and unitary at the same time.

In order to pursue this line of interpretation, the concept of “catholicity” and its related adjective needs to be examined so that the meaning given to the word

⁶² Idem, 1180-1184.

“system” can be more precisely defined when referred to Roman Catholicism. In fact, it makes it possible to qualify the Roman system in its own terms or, at least, in well established ones within the catholic tradition.⁶³ The conceptual world of catholicity has a long and fascinating history. To limit its meaning to the ecclesiastical and theological uses, it is of course a constitutive mark of the Church envisaged in the Apostles’ Creed and asserted by the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed. Besides its creedal use, catholicity is also a highly significant term recurring in wider patristic vocabulary as well as in subsequent theological orientations both in the East and in the West. Out of all possible examples, Vincent of Lérins’ definition of catholic faith as *quod ubique, quod semper, quod omnibus creditus est* epitomises its main thrust with special reference to doctrinal orthodoxy. Catholicity, nonetheless, has a much broader significance than mere doctrinal orthodoxy and entails, in Volf’s words, “the geographical (found everywhere), anthropological (encompassing all human beings), the revelational (containing all salvific truths), creational (healing all creation), soteriological (containing all salvific goods), or christological (bearing the whole Christ)”.⁶⁴ All these qualitative dimensions are conveyed in the concept of catholicity to such an extent that the wide inclusiveness of the term “catholic” is one distinguishing feature which indicates its great breadth and vast scope. In spite of its etymological meaning and ecclesiastical overtones, catholicity so defined is not in and of itself capable of fully accounting for the specific reality of Roman Catholicism as a system. This is just one, albeit foundational, aspect of its catholicity which calls for further elucidation. Together with the above mentioned qualitative dimension, the catholicity of Roman Catholicism has a *Roman* element which is so intertwined to it that it is an inextricable part of the whole. The adjective “Roman” is not just a geographical reference added to it but an essential and constitutive part of a system which is both Roman and catholic, or even better: Roman catholic in a single breath. The adjective Roman evokes historical, symbolic and ecclesiastical links which make Roman Catholicism the system that it is so that the *romanitas* of the system is co-essential with its catholicity. Surveying the historical development which gave rise to the “definition of the Roman Catholic particularity” and the “paradox of Catholic particularity”, Pelikan asserts that “the name ‘Roman Catholic’ conjoined the

⁶³ For an historical survey of the concept of catholicity, cf. Congar (1963) 145-150, Küng (1968) 296-318, and Dulles (1985) 13-29.

universality of the Church over the entire world, which has long been the content of the term ‘Catholic’, with the specificity of only one single see’.⁶⁵ Within the Western tradition then, Roman catholicity is a long established and vital union of catholic universality and Roman particularity, catholic plurality and Roman unity, catholic comprehensiveness and the Roman distinctiveness, the catholic *totus* and the Roman *locus*, catholic fullness and Roman partiality, catholic breadth and Roman narrowness, catholic elasticity and Roman rigidity, the catholic universe and the Roman centre, catholic organicism and Roman organisation, catholic faith and the Roman Church. The combination of apparently contradictory elements may seem utterly paradoxical and, indeed, it is at least a little paradoxical in character.⁶⁶ In this respect, referring to the catholicity envisaged by the Vatican II, Grillmeier would descriptively define it as a “union of opposites”⁶⁷ whose outcome is a dynamic unity which defies any attempt to encapsulate it in one-sided (i.e. merely historical, sociological or even theological) categories. Its composite name, “Roman Catholicism” conveys a pertinent idea of its complex make-up and its ideological genius. For all these reasons, it is hermeneutically feasible to approach the system in terms of its Roman catholicity. In turn, this kind of catholicity can be looked at from different perspectives which underline specific aspects of the system itself.

5.3.1 The Unity of the System

Evangelical apologist Francis Schaeffer spoke of the Roman Catholicism which the XVI century Reformers confronted as a “total system” or as “one underlying system”. In his opinion, it was this system “*as a system*” that was wrong in their eyes and which they departed from.⁶⁸ Leaving aside Schaeffer’s historical evaluation of the reasons for the Reformation breach with Roman Catholicism, the point is that his remarks underline that the catholicity of the system means that the system is basically one. Another evangelical theologian already examined in this research, Gerrit Berkouwer, refers to it as a “tightly closed and consistent system”,⁶⁹ thus

⁶⁴ Volf, 264.

⁶⁵ Pelikan, 245-246.

⁶⁶ As a matter of fact, Henri de Lubac uses the term “paradox” to qualify the specific type of catholic dialectics as it approaches the reality of mystery. Cf. his *The Church: Paradox and Mystery* (1969) and *Paradoxes of Faith* (1987).

⁶⁷ Grillmeier’s comment refers to chapter II of LG; quoted by Dulles (1985) 23.

⁶⁸ Schaeffer, *The God who is There*, 51.

⁶⁹ CWR, 5-6.

agreeing with the perception of Roman Catholicism as a unified and internally structured whole. No matter how complex, composite and nuanced the system is, it fundamentally retains a constitutive unity without which it would immediately become something entirely different.

The unity of the catholic system, however, has to be immediately qualified so as not to confuse it with a flattened unity or an oversimplified homogeneity which would certainly be a deformation of catholic unity. This unity manifests itself at the level of worldview, thus presenting a perspective on the world which is always distinctively catholic whatever form of expression it finds. There is also the institutional unity which contributes to the overall unity of the system by providing a central reference point which directs it. Though the Roman Catholic Church contains particular Churches, several ecclesial movements and has a highly complex structure, at the same time it is a single universal Church which is able to speak with a single voice and act according to a single will. As far as its doctrine is concerned, the magisterial unity gives a unitary framework and vision to its official theology which are based on shared presuppositions within the system. Even if theological pluralism is fully recognised, the magisterium aims at enhancing, preserving, and maintaining doctrinal cohesion and theological direction. Finally, the unity of the system is expressed by its project. Though each section is engaged in some specific areas with different goals, the system as a whole is the interpreter and actor of a composite project which includes them all. So, the manifold diversity within the system does not give rise to disconnected or disrupting pluralism since the system is held together not only by an institutional centre which provides the unifying structure, but also by a theological core which warrants and enhances the project of the catholic system.

5.3.2 The Dynamics of the System

Surveying the scene after the Second Vatican Council, David Tracy comments that: "The Roman Catholic identity is today far more complex and pluralistic than in the past, but it remains distinctly catholic".⁷⁰ In Tracy's view, there has been change but not alteration, renewal but not structural reformation, there is on-going development but not to the detriment of what is already given in the system.

The point which must be appreciated is that the Roman Catholic system, not only its contemporary post-Vatican II expression, is not static but aims at continuous

⁷⁰ Tracy, "L'identità cattolica romana", 162.

development and long term expansion. In fact, it is indwelt by a dynamism which makes it possible to compare it to a living organism and this metaphor can be aptly applied to it. Relying on its inner strengths and straining towards its goal, the system always moves forward maintaining its ability to expand its catholicity while preserving its basic theological orientation and institutional structure. The dynamics of the system can be seen from both a diachronic and a synchronic perspective. Avery Dulles would define the former “catholicity in length” and the latter “catholicity in breadth”.⁷¹

Diachronically, Roman Catholicism has an outstandingly long history which has forged and consolidated a system able to face different challenges and benefit from new opportunities. Adding to that, the system itself has developed significantly and has undergone *aggiornamento* in many respects while retaining the fundamental idea which gave rise to it. This development is not only a feature of its past but an on-going and utterly constitutive dimension of the system. From Bossuet to Newman and beyond, this has been an important theme substantially reflected upon within the catholic tradition.⁷² Moreover, it is indispensable to consider the inherent dynamics of the system when it comes to interpret the *semper eadem* mark of the Roman Church so that it is not confused with sheer immobility or fixed unchangeability.

Synchronically, Roman Catholicism expresses its dynamics by way of holding, keeping and pursuing a coherent worldview – even though not without tensions and conflicts. The system is dynamic enough to absorb and combine theology and praxis, institutions and movements, conservative and progressive tendencies, spirituality and management, mysticism and rationalism, philosophy and folklore, hierarchy and laity, etc: on the whole, an institutionalised worldview enjoying an inner life which preserves its constitutive marks and expands its identity. In both the historical and contemporary religious scene, it is difficult if not impossible to find another religious system which throughout its history has shown such a missionary afflatus and vitality and continues to do so today.

5.3.3 The Project of the System

Besides its fundamental unity and inherent dynamics, the system is constituted in such a way as to achieve an ambitious and over-arching goal. The global objective of

⁷¹ Respectively, Dulles (1985) 87-105 and 68-86.

Roman Catholicism is the furtherance of its catholicity which is already part of its make-up but also a pivotal feature of its vision. In the Roman Catholic understanding, catholicity is a nuanced term and has to do simultaneously with unity and totality which the Church already enjoys and is called to increase. The basic premise is that the whole of reality, which is already one in essence, though this protological unity is marred by sin, should be brought into a catholic unity which would re-establish redemptively the harmonious interaction between the universal and the particular.

This premise which enables the system to operate is also the goal of the system in the sense that since catholic unity can be achieved, it must be achieved and eventually will be achieved through the work of the system. The Church is seen as an expression, a guarantor and a promoter of catholic unity. The connection between starting premise, final goal and means to reach it, is well expressed by the opening paragraph of LG where it is stated that “by her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (1).⁷³ The Roman Catholic Church is the place where, in Dulles’ terms, the “catholicity from above” (i.e. the fullness of God in Christ) and the “catholicity from below” (i.e. the aspirations of nature) meet and move towards the eschatological recapitulation which will made effective what is already real though *in nuce*.⁷⁴ In the Church, the upward desires of nature to recover its oneness are met by the downward gift of grace which enhances it. The project can be named ecumenical catholicity (in the widest sense possible of the adjective ecumenical) if it has in view a progressive coincidence between the human community and the Church community. Moreover, in another programmatic sentence of Vatican II, it is said that “all are called to be part of this catholic unity of the People of God” (LG 13) meaning that all human beings have potential and eventual citizenship within the confines of the Church which is the meeting point between catholic fullness and the longing for catholicity. The Church, therefore, lives in a state of “tension .. to serve the manifestation of the

⁷² Cf. Chadwick (1987²) and Nichols (1990). For an Evangelical critical reflection on the Roman Catholic dialectics between development and continuity, cf. Nisus (2000).

⁷³ These fundamental ecclesiological tenets will be discussed in the next chapter on the evangelical theological appraisal of Roman Catholic basic presuppositions.

⁷⁴ On the “catholicity from above”, cf. Dulles (1985) 30-47; on the “catholicity from below”, cf. idem, 48-67.

essential tropism of the species, which is its unity”.⁷⁵ The mission of the Church is to achieve *de facto* what is already *de iure*: the identification between herself and the world.

Closely linked with this kind of ecumenical catholicity, there is also a cultural catholicity. All value, all truth, everything human, independently from its provenance and proponents, its contexts and goals, is to be included in the system so that it hosts the most comprehensive sum of human culture.⁷⁶ The project can also be seen as involving an ecclesial catholicity because if it is true that catholicity is not confined to the ecclesiastical dimension but aims at absorbing the whole of humanity, it is also true that catholicity has an ecclesial thrust as its core. The Roman Church is the instrument for increasing the degree of catholicity with a view to its eschatological realisation. Ecclesiastical ecumenism is an important laboratory for catholicity. As long as the institutional structure which preserves this unity remains intact, everything can and must find its home somewhere within the catholic system. In this way the system attempts to achieve its universal project.

5.3.4 The Regulative Principle of the System

Given the fundamental presuppositions and the main objective of the catholic system, the epistemological methodology chosen for its realisation is that of integration (*et-et*) of different elements or mutual inclusion (*in-in*) of apparently diverging aspects. By virtue of its well established patterns of *ratio cognoscendi*, Roman Catholicism is a master at incorporating into its system many elements which are not only different but contrasting and perhaps even incompatible, at least as far as the perception of other religious systems like the evangelical one is concerned. In this sense, the outcome of the *et-et* or *in-in* approach can be referred to as a *complexio oppositorum*, i.e. the combination into a synthesis of different, even opposite, ideas, principles and assertions.

⁷⁵ Dupront (1993) 11 (my English translation). Elsewhere in the same book, Dupront writes that, in the catholic perspective, “the foundation of the community of men” is “a balance based on the coexistence between autoctonies and what is greater than them, this ‘other’ which is unity”, 71 (my English translation). On similar lines, Perniola speaks of Roman Catholicism in terms of “the cultural form of a universal religion”; cf. the subtitle of Perniola (2001) (my English translation).

⁷⁶ In this respect, Dupront argues that “the Catholic Church progressively opens itself up to consecrate the diversity of cultures”, 71 (my English translation).

According to this epistemological catholicity, the essential criterion which serves the cause of the system is not that E~~v~~angelical purity or Protestant exclusiveness (i.e. the “sola, solus” of the Protestant confessional tradition) but that of a progressive inclusion into an ever-increasing catholicity and in a way which helps to reach the goal of the system. The insertion of the particular into the catholic broader perspective eliminates its apodictic specificity by putting it at the service of universality. Once the particular becomes part of the system, it loses its sharp edges and is modified in order to coexist with other particulars which together form the whole. As the system is permeated by an inherent dynamics, the synthesis produced by this kind of regulative principle is also dynamic and always *in itinere* towards an ever increasing fullness. It is a synthesis which calls for further synthesis by way of the expansion of its catholicity.

Reflecting on the epistemological catholicity of Roman Catholicism, after recalling Barth’s comment that “Roman Catholic theology is dialectical to the core”, von Balthasar convincingly argues that “Catholic thinking remains open, indeed its special characteristics is that it tends to keep opening up even more”.⁷⁷ This epistemological openness, however, is not to be confused with an unprincipled cacophony of voices nor with a tendentially anarchic driving force of the catholic framework of thought in that it is qualified and controlled by the fundamental unity of the system and serves the catholic unitary project through the structures of the system.

5.3.5 The Structures of the System

The catholicity of the system has a multidimensional outlook in which all aspects are linked together in the service of the whole and with a view to the expansion of the system. Besides all the profiles that have been briefly evoked, there is another basic feature that is particularly related to the *romanitas* of the system in the sense that it is closely associated to its status as a highly structured organisation. The Roman Catholic Church has a structured catholicity or an institutionalised catholicity since, in Dupront’s significant expression, she is a “living structure of unity”.⁷⁸ In the catholic framework of thought, catholicity is never a merely abstract or ideal concept but, on the contrary, is always intertwined with visible, material, immanent,

⁷⁷ Both quotations are taken from Hans U. von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (1992) 253.

organised, social, juridical, and historical structures. Karl Adam again argues that the “internal catholicity” of the Roman Church which expresses her spiritual strengths inevitably corresponds to her “external catholicity” which renders it visible and makes it present so that it is impossible for the former to exist apart from the latter and vice versa.⁷⁹

The catholic insistence on the necessity of this aspect in the self-understanding of the Church impinges on the upholding of the incarnational principle which is considered the normative pattern of divine grace as it sustains and elevates nature. The theological “logic” behind the unique incarnation of the Son of God is that grace must be embodied in a tangible way. This fundamental, permanent rule in the economy of revelation, providence and redemption finds its climax in the story of the incarnate Son but reflects a wider principle which is constitutive for divine grace from the catholic viewpoint: grace, in order to be grace and because it is grace, must be incarnate, that is mediated “in palpable and social form”.⁸⁰ The Church in her essence, office and mission, is an organised structure because it follows the same governing principle that underlay the coming of Jesus Christ and, after the ascension of the Risen Lord and the coming of the Holy Spirit, works through the “structures of the Church”,⁸¹ and inevitably so.

This profoundly theological justification for the structural dimension safeguards the system from being approached in merely functional and sociological terms and prevents the Catholic Church from being reduced to a sociologically connoted group. The ever present danger which is felt from a catholic point of view is to analyse the universe of the Roman Church as if it were a social entity demanding and requiring to be exclusively evaluated with sociological or historiographical tools. In this respect, von Balthasar powerfully argues that “there is no ‘structure’ existing independently of the event of Christ”,⁸² and therefore the structural element is built into the catholic theology of grace. As the system is the institutional embodiment of its worldview which serves its project, it is absolutely necessary and theologically warranted for the system itself to be structurally

⁷⁸ Dupront (1993) 71 (my English translation).

⁷⁹ Adam, *The Spirit of Catholicism* (1923).

⁸⁰ Dulles (1985) 112.

⁸¹ This expression is borrowed from the title of a book by Hans Küng, *Structures of the Church* (1965).

⁸² H.U. von Balthasar, *Truth is symphonic* (1987) 96.

connoted, even though this dimension has to be appreciated in its own terms and in the context of the other dimensions of the system.

Thinking of this non-negotiable aspect of the catholic system and showing his willingness to identify its outward expressions, Dulles argues that the structures of the Church are both “sacramental” and “hierarchical”.⁸³ As has already been noted in the section on the project of the system, the Roman Church self-understands her identity as being that of a “sacrament” which, because of the evocative and instrumental nature of a sacrament, has a structural outlook in order to be what it is and to pursue its mission. Even the administration of the sacraments requires the presence of a structured body which dispenses them. As far as the hierarchical aspect of the structure of the system is concerned, the Roman Church thinks of herself as being an ordered society hierarchically structured according to different status and functions. So, both the sacramental and hierarchical natures of the Church point to the structural thrust which permeates the system.

5.4 THE PREVAILING LACK OF SYSTEMIC AWARENESS IN THE EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

The second part of the research has attempted to introduce the different lines of the evangelical interpretation of Roman Catholicism which have emerged after the crucial years of the second Vatican Council. The introductory critical survey which has been provided has singled out a variety of approaches that different authors and dialogues have pursued in constructing their evangelical perceptions and evaluations of Roman Catholicism. The plurality of hermeneutical strategies coupled with the diversity of historical and theological contexts apparently reproduce the inner complexity of contemporary evangelical theology *per se*, characterised as it is by different confessional traditions and cultural milieus. Against this general background, the promising route of a systemic evaluation of Roman Catholicism has been suggested and its essential thrust has been derived from the seminal work by Abraham Kuyper and from significant Catholic voices reflecting on the heart of Catholicism itself. The methodology of the systemic critical appraisal represents what seems to be the most adequate way of ~~in~~ coming to terms with the Roman

⁸³ Dulles (1985) 106-126.

Catholic universe and the most fruitful in providing an overall framework of reference.

Looking back to what Evangelical theology has produced on Roman Catholicism, and seeing it against the background of the proposed systemic approach, some critical remarks are both necessary and legitimate. Although it may seem a too generic statement, it is not an unfair criticism. Much of contemporary evangelical reflection on Roman Catholicism has been driven, with few exceptions and in different degrees, by an atomistic approach to it ^{RATHER} than by systemic concerns. This hermeneutical option, often more assumed than specifically spelt out and argued for, has contributed to the rather fragmentary critique that evangelical theology as a whole has been able to construe in the last few decades. The difficulty in understanding Catholicism as a multifaceted but integrated whole has led to an evaluation of different Catholic *loci* or several sides of Catholicism. However, an awareness of its co-essential unity and diversity is seriously lacking or significantly wanting. This general statement needs to be demonstrated by a more careful evaluation of the works of individual theologians or the results of bilateral dialogues.

As has already been indicated,⁸⁴ the term “atomism” was referred to the fragmentary study of Roman Catholicism by Gerrit Berkouwer in his book *The Conflict with Rome*. “To concentrate on an atomistic analysis in order to know Rome”, writes Berkouwer, “is an unsatisfactory procedure” because it falls short of considering “the structure of Rome in its entirety”. While Berkouwer does not develop further his critique of atomism, though he advocates the opposite approach and works out his own interpretation of Roman Catholicism accordingly, it is important to point out what are the underlying features of atomism itself.

In this research, atomism is considered as an epistemological framework which favours the analysis of components, parts, elements of a given reality without appreciating sufficiently their inherent relationships and organic bond. In short, atomism is an analysis which falls short of synthesis, it emphasises particulars while not adequately accounting for universals, it stresses the importance of particular aspects and underestimates the relevance of structures. Of course, atomism does not pursue an absolute ^{NEGLECT} of systemic insights but is nonetheless the overarching paradigm which mediates knowledge and guides understanding. Applying this rather introductory definition to the study of Roman Catholicism, atomism

⁸⁴ Cf. 2.1.1, 45. Berkouwer's quotation is taken from CWR, 5.

denotes a set of interpretative perspectives which are governed by a sustained attention to its phenomenological manifestations but are not accompanied by a comparable appreciation of its constitutive and pervasive catholicity. They may differ significantly on the chosen atom(s) which are the privileged subject(s) of investigation though their outcomes are inevitably influenced by varying degrees of fragmentation and partiality. The theologians whose works on Roman Catholicism have been introduced in Chapter Two provide an useful starting point in order to check the feasibility of the above mentioned remarks concerning evangelical hermeneutical choices in dealing with it.

5.4.1 Gerrit Berkouwer

The first two theologians ^{WHO} have been surveyed represent a noteworthy exception to the general pursuit of an atomistic pattern. Not by chance, Gerrit Berkouwer and Cornelius Van Til belong to the same broad neo-calvinistic tradition which was promoted by Abraham Kuyper and among whose distinctive features there is a consistent tendency towards a loosely defined systemic way of thinking. It is not surprising then to find their analyses largely indebted to the Kuyperian way of looking at Roman Catholicism as a competing system with respect to Calvinism and Evangelicalism. Yet, after acknowledging the apparent similarity of their theological background and critical proposal, there are also differences between the two.

As has already been pointed out,⁸⁵ Berkouwer's appraisal shows a significant methodological shift between the first, pre-Vatican II major book (*The Conflict with Rome*) and the third one, written when the Council was still open (*The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*). Whereas the former work is characterised by serious systemic concerns in terms of its methodology (i.e. the interest in the Catholic "basic religious motive", the awareness that the theological difference between Catholicism and Protestantism can be found in "every department of life" though stemming from "one single denominator", the constant attempt always to connect together every part of the doctrinal body in that it is considered as a whole), the latter testifies to a more nuanced reading of the conciliar background and proceedings which is far less committed to maintaining the same degree of systemic consistency due to the state of flux which characterises the Roman Church at the time of Vatican II. Berkouwer's latter work employs a less defined

⁸⁵ Cf. 2.1.4, 57.

methodological apparatus and seeks to come to terms with the contingent mobility and subtlety of contemporary Roman Catholicism. The result is that his tentative description tends to rule out the possibility of even a provisional assessment because the situation which is under scrutiny seems to override the interpretative schemes of the past which he had been using up to the late Sixties. Being a clever and knowledgeable theologian, Berkouwer is well aware that the Catholic “newness” which causes a degree of perplexity in the evangelical observer has to be apprehended in a catholic sense (i.e. *aggiornamento*) and applied within the dynamic context of Roman Catholicism (i.e. “development”).

Methodologically, though, Berkouwer softens his systemic approach by trying to depict the situation as fairly as possible while suspending any critical evaluation to a further stage. Unfortunately, he did not write on the subject after the publication of *The Second Vatican Council and the New Catholicism*, thus leaving his reading of Vatican II and beyond without the systemic framework of his earlier works but also without a refined hermeneutics capable of replacing it. His otherwise outstanding reflection is marked by the sense of an unfinished task as far as the basic interpretative categories are concerned.

5.4.2 Cornelius Van Til

Cornelius Van Til’s work stands out in present-day evangelical theological reflection as the most linear and coherent apologetical attempt to consider Roman Catholicism as a Kuyperianly defined life-system. While recognising the comprehensiveness of its worldview, Van Til is of course interested in what his apologetical language refers to as the “presuppositions” of Roman Catholicism. This concentration on the level of basic schemes of thought, while considerably limiting his analysis to the theoretical dimension with little interaction with Roman Catholic sources, nonetheless represents the right epistemological approach in seeking to understand Roman Catholicism systemically. Unless the Roman system is dealt with from a presuppositional perspective, the subsequent evaluation will be significantly marked by varying degrees of atomism in that the phenomenology of the system will be easily severed from its ideological source and historical context.

At this point, the difference between Van Til and Kuyper should be noted in spite of the convergence of their methodological starting points. Both authors address Roman Catholicism as if it were a system but they differ in terms of singling out the

decisive elements which determine its fundamental orientation. Whereas Kuyper underlines the fact that the “mediation” factor is its distinct “condition”, Van Til argues that it is the “synthesis” between Christian and non-Christian elements. Kuyper seems to highlight the pivotal function of the catholic pattern of establishing the relationship between God and the world by way of the normative mediation of the Church while Van Til underlines the epistemological strategy behind Catholicism which consists in combining and finally fusing the Christian motif with the Aristotelian form-matter scheme (resulting in “traditional”, Thomist Catholicism) or with the Kantian freedom-nature one (resulting in “modern”, post-Vatican II Catholicism). The two perspectives are not necessarily mutually exclusive or utterly incompatible; they certainly represent two options which identify the heart of Roman Catholicism in two different areas and according to two different controlling principles.

The concern here is not to develop further the issue of what the key-element is which informs the Roman Catholic system but simply to indicate the shared hermeneutical assumption which underscores both approaches. The merits of Van Til’s working hypothesis will have to be evaluated in a later stage but the consistency of his Kuyperian, systemic evaluation can hardly be underestimated. Unlike Berkouwer in his last work, Van Til is not greatly impressed by the kind of “aggiornamento” and “ressourcement” brought by Vatican II, to the point of not requiring an even minimal alteration to his overall critical appraisal based on his systemic interpretation. For Van Til, both “traditional” and “modern” Roman Catholicism, pre- and post-Vatican II, in spite of all their sharp and manifold differences, are nonetheless governed by the same kind of (in his eyes) unfortunate and fatal “synthesis”. The contents of the synthesis may distinguish them to a certain extent but its structure clearly unites them in their presuppositional set-up. In his systemic integrity and coherence vis-à-vis Roman Catholicism, Van Til has been an isolated voice within mainstream evangelical theology which has generally preferred more atomistic methods.

5.4.3 David Wells

Reflection on the works by David Wells points again to a similar sense of hermeneutical perplexity which characterised Berkouwer’s book on Vatican II. Wells, in particular, epitomises very clearly widespread evangelical perplexity in

coming to terms with the complexity and subtlety of the Roman system as it emerged from the Second Vatican Council and its immediate aftermath. In the presence of the catholic stereophony of many conciliar statements and the increasing, sometimes conflicting diversity within what is still considered to be institutional unity, Wells faces a fundamental hermeneutical problem. "Which interpretation is correct?" is a searching question rhetorically asked to the Council but also in practice addressed to the Evangelical theologian himself who seeks to study contemporary Catholicism. Even more than that of the late Berkouwer, Wells' analysis stands out for the acute awareness of its being utterly provisional and precarious.

The issue which unfortunately Wells does not pursue further is whether the hermeneutical problem lies with the idiosyncratic outlook of Vatican II or with the defectiveness of the evangelical epistemological apparatus in dealing with it. In other words, what the evangelical theologian perceives as a "divided mind" could well be the "catholic mind" which is inherently capable of bypassing the apodictic tendencies of heretical thought by reducing them to particular emphases inserted into a wider whole. Moreover, the "state of flux" that Wells envisages in *Revolution in Rome* may not be a temporary compromise between contrasting forces waiting for a final solution but rather the stable, yet dynamic pattern of Catholicism which enables the system to hold together different elements which in other theological orientations are /would be/ considered to be incompatible. Before the interpretative crux of Vatican II, Wells takes the view that the Council represents a temporary, transient balance which will eventually lead to the affirmation of one party over the other. His overall interpretation lacks a robust sense of Roman Catholicism as being a system which has doctrinal stability in spite of theological dynamism which introduces degrees of development, historical continuity in spite of contingent tensions which threaten it, and institutional unity in spite of centrifugal forces operating within it.

Unlike Van Til, Wells commendably pays careful attention to catholic sources and sets a model for serious evangelical interaction with Roman Catholicism. The problem is that this commendable attitude is methodologically wanting and in the end unfruitful if it is severed from a solid interpretative framework which is capable of coming to grips with the Roman system *as* system. Unfortunately, after the perplexity of *Revolution in Rome*, Wells has gradually reduced his interest in Roman Catholicism and this development has left a significant noticeable gap in evangelical reflection on it. Like Berkouwer, Wells has left an unfinished task in

terms of establishing, refining and applying a distinctly evangelical approach to Roman Catholicism.

5.4.4 Donald Bloesch

Donald Bloesch is a theologian whose work is a representative example of the evangelical tendency of borrowing ways of interpreting Roman Catholicism without rethinking them in a thoroughly evangelical way. His usual way of arguing makes use of the theological ideal-types proposed by Paul Tillich (i.e. “catholic substance” and “protestant principle”) and seems to indicate at least an attempt to engage in a sort of systemic task. According to Bloesch, Roman Catholicism is a defective and always penultimate historical actualisation of the “catholic substance”. The dialectical tension between the catholic principle and the institutional embodiment which bears the adjective “catholic” cannot be resolved unless the Roman Church is seriously impacted by the evangelical ethos. The use of these somewhat Tillichian themes is used by Bloesch in a descriptive way rather than as a starting point for shaping a distinct, critical perspective which would resolutely take the systemic direction. However, the Tillichian type of analysis is subsequently merely referred to but not constructively elaborated.

In the absence of a solid interpretative framework, Bloesch develops his analysis of Catholic spirituality according to phenomenological concerns without penetrating the issue adequately by connecting spirituality to the rest of the system and seeing it as an expression of a wider worldview. When confronted with the need to investigate specific aspects of Roman Catholicism, Bloesch does not work out the often evoked Tillichian approach and favours a more phenomenological reading.

5.4.5 Herbert Carson

Herbert Carson embodies a different kind of evangelical theologising, not necessarily inferior in terms of qualitative substance but less ambitious in terms of academic standards and more committed to apologetical purposes. In echoing popular arguments and pursuing a well entrenched confrontational line, his analysis of Roman Catholicism mirrors widespread convictions among the traditional evangelical constituency. To a certain extent, Carson envisages a kind of systemic evaluation when he delineates the thesis of the *semper eadem* with regards to the Catholic Church. Assuming unchangeability as her *de facto* as well as *de iure* basic

feature already implies the formulation a preliminary judgement whose theological plausibility has to be ascertained but whose systemic thrust is indisputable.

This governing thesis, however, is neither sufficiently argued for nor is it consistently employed in shaping the overall interpretative framework. In fact, what Carson does after suggesting a possible element which characterises the whole of Roman Catholicism, is to provide a list of specific areas of controversy without always appreciating their connections and role within what, in his opinion, is an unchanging and unchangeable system. Here again, the phenomenological analysis does not match an integrated hermeneutical perspective, resulting in a rather fragmented view of Catholicism itself.

5.4.6 John Stott

John Stott is the last evangelical theologian whose reflection on Roman Catholicism was introduced in Chapter Two. Besides his own writings, his decisive contribution to ERCDOM facilitates the transition in assessing the degree of systemic awareness from the works of individual theologians to the outcome of various bilateral dialogues.

Stott's perception of the situation of the Roman Catholic Church after Vatican II closely resembles and almost parallels the already evoked puzzlement expressed by Wells. This is not surprising as Stott wrote an enthusiastic foreword to *Revolution in Rome* and, in his own work, he shows signs of assimilation of the evangelical perplexity espoused in that book. The image of the Church of Rome sitting "on the fence" in an unstable way waiting either to go forward or backwards is very symptomatic of the contagious "wait and see" attitude. As suggested earlier, such interpretative dispositions, though historically understandable, are nonetheless of limited use in elaborating a systemic viewpoint and would seem to increase the importance of atomistic considerations.

With regard to the issue discussed here, the significance of Stott can be seen elsewhere than in his rather episodic writings on Roman Catholicism and precisely his encouragement of a pioneering initiative of dialogue between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. ERCDOM and its dialogical methodology is perhaps his most lasting input into the evangelical interpretative task in dealing with Roman Catholicism. Stott's rationale for the promotion of dialogue seems to be that whereas the understanding of a complex reality like Roman Catholicism may be subject to

various limitations, dialogue must be pursued at all costs. According to Stott, a consciously precarious hermeneutics of Catholicism is not an excuse for refusing to enter into a potentially meaningful interaction. In fact, besides the need to approach it adequately, there is the obligation to encounter Roman Catholicism by relating to and debating with Catholics. This attitude marked by openness is not in and of itself a sufficient warrant for the fruitfulness of dialogue. As in the case of ERCDOM, the dialogue can result in a common reflection which is in the main unsatisfactory because of its rather superficial treatment of the issues involved and its evident lack of systemic depth.

As will also be pointed out later, it is extremely difficult, if not entirely impossible, to prevent dialogue from being driven by an atomistic methodology because it represents an easier way of dealing with the involvement of at least two parties which are both plural in their composition and of concentrating on specific areas without having to explore wider fields and connect them into a unified whole.

5.4.7 The Contribution of the World Evangelical Fellowship

The World Evangelical Fellowship has both produced a long statement on Roman Catholicism and is engaged in an on-going dialogue with official representatives of the Catholic Church. An evaluation of its espoused hermeneutical framework must take into account these two significantly different dimensions of its reflection, the former being a unilaterally written document with a strong apologetical thrust, the latter being a bilateral initiative specifically aimed at constructively presenting the respective positions in an explorative ecumenical setting. Moreover, the dialogue so far has not been finalised towards a common statement but has limited itself only to the publication of the papers read and discussed at the various meetings held.

As far as the *Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism* is concerned, its background and goal clearly define its whole approach as being moderately confrontational with the view of compacting the evangelical front whose cohesion had been threatened by inner tensions over the attitude of WEF towards the Roman Church. As the text itself is the result of the work of a theological commission, the *Perspective* can be considered as the *status quaestionis* of the evangelical perception of Roman Catholicism some twenty years after the closing of the Second Vatican Council. Its hermeneutical import is nonetheless wanting as the majority of evangelical perspectives have shown themselves to be. In fact, while the statement

takes issue with various doctrinal topics or contentious areas in an introductory way, it does not attempt to focus on what is fundamentally at stake in the controversy between Evangelicalism and Roman Catholicism and, consequently, does not shape its entire discourse systemically. It gives the impression of a mere collection of divisive issues rather than an articulated treatment of the issue in its multifaceted manifestation. In this respect, the critical observation of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of Christian Unity on the *Perspective* is very pertinent in that it indicates its insufficient attention to “the root of the problems” or its “central issues”.⁸⁶ In other words, it underscores the insufficient degree of systemic awareness which is instead a necessary condition to deal with Roman Catholicism properly.

Unfortunately, however, in spite of these promising premises, the dialoguing initiative which was initiated after the Vatican reaction has only partially corrected the unsatisfactory hermeneutical matrix. It is true that the careful choice of topics of the discussion has been done with the explicit desire to grapple with the fundamental issues which were perhaps neglected in the 1986 evangelical *Perspective*. The mere singling out of crucial areas, however, is not in and on itself the distinguishing mark of a systemic approach which would function as a watershed with regards to more atomistic approaches. These paramount elements, in fact, though being essential in coming to terms with the heart of Roman Catholicism, can be treated in an atomistic way, thus reducing their potential usefulness in seeking to construe a different interpretative strategy.

The problem of an Evangelical hermeneutics of Roman Catholicism is not solved with the identification of specific points or doctrines which have priority over others in terms of explaining Evangelical-Roman Catholic differentiation. What is needed, instead, is the appropriation of a distinctively systemic view to use in looking at every single issue, be it considered foundational or peripheral but always expressing the system as a whole. The evangelical contribution to the dialogue between WEF and the Pontifical Council, to a large extent and as far as the published material is concerned, depends heavily on the approaches taken by the individual theologians in the WEF Theological Commission who are invited to submit a paper on the topic under discussion. So, while Blocher seems to be the most alert to the wider implications and inter-relations which are involved in the issues he tackles, Vandervelde and Escobar show a more limited understanding of Roman Catholicism

⁸⁶ Cf. 3.2, 119.

as a unified system, even though their theological input is generally very knowledgeable and comprehensive.

On the whole, the impression gathered so far is that WEF is not producing a distinctive and consistent systemic evaluation of Roman Catholicism but is rather reflecting broader evangelical trends of interpretation which are more inclined towards the study of Roman Catholic theological phenomenology.

5.4.8 “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” and “The Gift of Salvation”

The last dialogue which must be analysed in this section is the North American “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT) and “The Gift of Salvation” (GOS). Already in the introductory presentation of the main features of the documents, a general methodological point has been put forward when it was argued that “culture war” concerns were the guiding motivation behind the whole of ECT process. Such cultural provenance has also contributed to direct the dialogue which has led to the elaboration of the two common statements. In these agreed texts, a typical atomistic blueprint is overwhelmingly present and thoroughly pursued.

Leaving aside the merits of the socio-cultural thrust of the initiative, it is important to underline that it is the theological methodology and insight which gird it. The way in which ECT and GOS treat the theological problem between Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism is very telling in this respect. On the one hand (as in the case of ECT especially), the contextual recognition of a common confessional basis and long and deep standing differences indicates a rather conventional and superficial reading of the issues involved in that relationship. Beside the latter stand the former and this reality is simply assumed and legitimated. No serious effort is made to account theologically for the co-existence of apparent convergences and evident discrepancies between Evangelical and Roman Catholic theological frameworks. ECT simply mirrors the superficial outlook of the situation as it is understood by its promoters without coming to terms with it because the premises of the dialogue do not allow for a more penetrating analysis in terms of a systemic approach. On the whole, it is arguable that “culture war” pressures override theological lucidity. On the other hand (as in the case of GOS), the attempt to deal with the divisive and ramified issue of the doctrine of justification by faith shows a tendency towards theological superficiality and ecumenical ingenuity. Superficiality because a short conversation and a brief text which, though intelligently conceived

and carefully drafted, is extremely ambiguous in its language and, because of this, cannot represent a significant move forward in the ~~re~~²approach²ment of the two traditions. Ingenuity because, while claiming to be a watershed of historical proportions in a fundamental doctrinal area with implications for both ^{ENTIRE} theological orientations, the document simply reiterates the existing issues still replete with controversy which the agreement evidently has not removed nor even touched. Its theological significance is then immediately proved by the fact that, in spite of its alleged ecumenical success, both ECT and GOS do not maintain their self-attributed claims. In the end, the varying forms of hermeneutical atomism can lead to short-cuts which are nonetheless theologically implausible and ecumenically unfruitful.

CHAPTER SIX

TOWARDS A CRITICAL APPRAISAL (II): THE PROBLEM OF AN EVANGELICAL THEOLOGICAL EVALUATION OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM

What has been argued in the previous chapter is that the evangelical theological perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism are, generally speaking, hermeneutically weak in that, while presenting a certain variety of approaches to it, in the main their interpretative agenda is lacking in systemic awareness. A consequence of this specific weakness is that much of what has been written in evangelical theological circles after the Second Vatican Council is characterised by interpretative fragmentation, making it difficult for evangelical theology to address the fundamental structures of Roman Catholicism and therefore to engage in constructive ecumenical interaction with Catholic theology and the Roman Church. The recognition of this evangelical problem in the area of the hermeneutics of different theological systems and ecclesiastical institutions is one of the main thrusts of the present research. The other main concern has been to advocate and sketch out an alternative interpretative model with regard to the hermeneutical “babel” of evangelical analysis. The model suggested revolves around the category of system and strives to consider Roman Catholicism as such. This was the conclusion which was reached at the end of the last chapter and it is also the starting point of the present one. The last chapter attempted to deal with the phenomenology of the system whereas the purpose of this one is to investigate the essential theological contours of the system. The critical delineation of the basic theological structure of Roman Catholicism will precede the presentation of the variety of theological appraisals pursued in evangelical writings on Roman Catholicism after Vatican II.

6.1 THE THEOLOGICAL FRAMEWORK OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM AS A SYSTEM

Several references have already been made to the fact that the Roman Catholic system has a theological core which makes it possible for the system to foster its unity, achieve its goal, and make its structures function. In a way essentially different from any other element which helps the system to operate, its basic theological

framework plays a distinctly foundational role because it represents its theological aetiology and heuristics. Every part of the system is in some way causally connected to and operatively dependent on the theology of the system to the extent that the attempt to grasp the centre opens the way to an understanding of the whole. The catholicity of the system is very simply a product of its theological vision. This much repeated assertion has been evoked rather than argued for and it is time to try to substantiate it by indicating and exploring the essential profile of the Roman Catholic over-arching framework. A systemic approach can be so defined if it touches on this basic core and interprets the "Roman Catholic" universe accordingly. In turn, addressing Roman Catholicism in this way is an act of theological responsibility in that it makes it necessary to point out and investigate the tenets of a such a complex reality. Abraham Kuyper and the catholic theologians briefly mentioned in the previous chapter have all accepted the risky task of seeking to present what is at stake theologically in the case of Roman Catholicism, though from different theological points of view and, of course, with different results. In opposition to an obsessive study of the particulars without an adequate perception of the underlying framework, the systemic approach calls for an interpretation which deals with the framework while attempting to do justice to the particulars, even though it cannot embark on a meticulous analysis of any given particular. This is, academically speaking, a highly risky enterprise. In fact, the risk of an oversimplified, reductionist, and in the last analysis misleading reading carried out under the auspices of a systemic approach is ever present, but is also inevitable if we are to avoid endorsing an atomistic interpretation, with all its defective premises and dubious outcomes. The risk of not taking the risk has wider consequences and implications than the risk of taking it consciously and conscientiously.

Although it is important to be fully aware of what is being proposed as regards the theological framework of Roman Catholicism, it is necessary to delineate it in order to flesh it out, thus testing the feasibility of a systemic approach. Broadly speaking, the kernel of the system will be found in two main theological *loci*, that is the relationship between nature and grace as it is articulated within the Roman Catholic system, on the one hand, and the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church as a Church, on the other. The whole argument will revolve around the idea that if the nature-grace motif provides the theological scope of the system, the ecclesial self-understanding is its key theological reference point determining its

orientation and expressions. The latter is engrafted in the former, and, taken together, they form the overall theological framework which causes the system to be what it is and to do what it does.

6.1.1 The Relationship between Nature and Grace as the Theological Horizon of the Roman Catholic System

Nature and grace are two fundamental categories in all theological discourse. Even if they are taken separately and on their own terms, they are always at the centre of any theological attempt to come to terms with the Christian faith. As far as former is concerned, in the Western tradition, reality in the widest possible sense has been accounted for first philosophically then theologically in terms of “nature”. In Christian vocabulary, nature has been considered the equivalent of the created world as a whole which is both the result of God’s creating activity and the recipient of His saving purposes. As far as the latter is concerned, God’s dealings with the world (i.e. nature) have been accounted for theologically in terms of “grace”. Grace is what God does in relation to the world, both providentially and redemptively. Because of their comprehensive scope, nature and grace are essential terms in a Christian basic account of God and the world.¹ Nothing can escape from being approached in terms of nature and grace in that they cover the whole spectrum of Christian understanding of reality. In this respect, it is difficult to disagree with Carpenter’s claim that “no Christian doctrine can be dealt with adequately without recourse to the nature and grace schema”.²

Nature and grace are also evoked when reference is made to terms such as, for instance, “supernatural” in the substantive or adjectival sense, as in “supernatural order”. Both uses of “supernatural” point to the fact that grace is *super* nature, the meaning of which is disputed but its reality is fully recognised. Though encompassing the whole of theological discourse, nature and grace are used with a particularly anthropological thrust. According to TeSelle, the issue of nature and grace can be thought of in terms of the conditions for man’s fellowship with God and the role of grace in attaining such a relationship: the theological rationale of nature

¹ For a brief account on the concept of nature and grace in Roman Catholic theology, cf. Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Theology of Karl Barth* (1992) 267-325 and Alfaro (1969). For an historical overview, cf. Benvenuto (1989).

² Carpenter (1988) ix. He is nonetheless aware of the fact that “discussion of the relation of nature and grace is out of favor in much contemporary theology”, *idem*.

and grace is that “what man becomes in fellowship with God cannot be derived solely from his own capabilities for self-development, however much those capabilities may be involved in the process”, so that “human nature is somehow complemented by divine grace, the free decision of God to call men into communion with himself”.³ Their correlation, then, provides the basic orientation for every theological framework, not only the Roman Catholic one. In this tradition, the issue has been reflected upon much more fully and comprehensively than in the protestant camp which has basically neglected it. Theological fashions may change in their outlook and emphases but, implicitly or explicitly, the relationship between nature and grace has been and “remains a theological perennial”,⁴ even nowadays when the theme does not seem to receive the same amount of attention as in the post-Reformation era.

Bearing in mind its theological and historical importance, well-argued attempts have been made in recent decades to consider the development of theological thought in the West under the rubric of the relationship between nature and grace.⁵ These historical exercises are theologically plausible only if this relationship is considered to be an essential condition of theological discourse itself, quite independently of the degree of importance attributed to it by single theologians or different theological traditions throughout history. The assumption behind them is that the nature-grace motif is the *de facto* matrix for theological thinking because it deals with fundamental tenets of the Christian faith, though it may not have received explicit attention or careful investigation. If this is the case, theological systems depend heavily on its articulation for their orientation in terms of vision, project and structure, thus making it almost compulsory for an interpretation which aims at pursuing a systemic approach to come to terms with the nature-grace schema. This is even more necessary when it comes to facing the task of interpreting Roman

³ TeSelle (1971) 542.

⁴ Duffy (1992) 7. Later in his book, Duffy affirms that “the relationship of nature and grace is a perennial among theological problems”, 49.

⁵ e.g. Vanneste (1996), Carpenter (1988), Gelpi (2000). These works do not have the same degree of historical thoroughness and theological perception but they all recognise the centrality of the nature-grace motif for the Western tradition. In spite of his comment about its apparent eclipse in contemporary theology (cf. n. 1, 195), Carpenter (1988) nonetheless explores present-day developments in Tillich, Rahner, Metz, Moltmann, Whitehead, and Westermann whereas Duffy (1992) investigates the issue in the works of De Lubac, Rahner, von Balthasar, Alfaro, Schillebeeckx and Sekler.

Catholicism as a system. In fact, apart from the paramount importance of the relationship between nature and grace for any theological current, the Roman Catholic tradition is perhaps the one which has more extensively cultivated and willingly promoted reflection on the issue to the extent that its tradition as a whole may be thought of as being largely shaped along the lines of the nature-grace motif. In the case of Roman Catholicism, what is theologically inevitable for other systems is also historically attestable because the issue has been a major theme of the development of its theological framework, especially, but not exclusively in the post-tridentine period. TeSelle stresses the fact that “nature and grace became perhaps the central topic of intramural controversy in post-Tridentine Catholic theology, its *articulus stantis et cadentis Ecclesiae*”.⁶ For all these briefly mentioned reasons, a systemic approach to Roman Catholicism cannot fail to address the relationship between nature and grace aware of the fact that it is a constitutive element of its system and, therefore, an essential criterion to use in assessing evangelical theological perspectives on Roman Catholicism.

6.1.1.1 The Different Typologies Within the Overall Unitary Roman Catholic Tradition

Having recognised the place of the nature-grace motif for any serious attempt to deal with Roman Catholicism as a system, some qualifications are required in order to respect the complexity of the matter and not to oversimplify an extremely nuanced and stratified topic. Historically, the Roman catholic theological tradition has witnessed a great variety of different, sometimes contrasting, articulations of the motif and, even considering its present-day profile, in Roman Catholic theology and the official magisterium there are a number of diverse models relating nature and grace. Both in its history and in its contemporary outlook, the Roman Catholic system makes the co-existence of a range of typologies of this relationship possible, thus making it necessary to specify which articulation is envisaged among the many possibilities within the same tradition. There is no single Roman Catholic ^{DECLENSION} of the nature-grace motif, but there is a state of theological flux within the confines of the system in which a plurality of motifs emerge, develop, interact (sometimes fighting one another), but always remaining within the perimeter established by the system. The powerful energies of the catholicity of the system enable it to maintain

⁶ TeSelle (1971) 540.

this diversity to a certain extent. The magisterial office aims at finding a synthesis between the different perspectives which is always dynamically provisional, thus developing, enlarging and consolidating the theological basis of the system without subverting it. It is only when the system perceives that a particular nature-grace perspective is a potentially dangerous threat to its unity, project and structures, that it resolutely moves towards its expulsion from the vast, wide but not unprincipled theological domain of the Church. In modern Roman Catholicism, this has been the case with Baius who was condemned in 1567,⁷ with Jansenius, condemned in 1653,⁸ and with Quesnel, condemned in 1713.⁹ These were not the only controversies over the issue, but those which were considered dangerous for the well-being and stability of the system. The degree of theological compatibility is established by the magisterial office which tends to single out and exclude those approaches which would cause the disruption of the system.

6.1.1.1 Dualistic and holistic tendencies

Drawing a feasible map of the typologies of the nature-grace motifs is a highly problematic exercise because of the historical and theological complexities of the issue, yet a systemic approach to Roman Catholicism cannot be pursued without attempting to grasp the multifaceted issues related to nature and grace and their fundamental role within the Roman Catholic system. The line which will be followed is a rather descriptive one while the next section will try to underline the theological thrust involved in the presentation of this typology as a whole. In the Roman Catholic system, many ways of relating nature and grace have theological citizenship and can be divided into different categories according to the various perspectives which are used in coming to terms with the spectrum of actual possibilities.

Following a criterion which emphasises the ontological framework of their articulations, nature-grace motifs can be placed on a line between two poles: dualistic thinking and tendentially holistic thinking. It is clear that several authoritative post-tridentine interpretations of the Thomist legacy, notably that of Cajetan, Suarez and

⁷ Cf. Pius V's Bull *Ex omnibus afflictionibus* (DS, 1901-1980). On the Baius controversy, cf. Vanneste, "Le «De prima hominis justitia» de M. Baius. Une relecture critique", 185-228.

⁸ Cf. Innocent X's Constitution *Cum occasione* (DS, 2001-2007). On Jansenius' theology of nature and grace, cf. Vanneste, "Pour une relecture critique de l'*Augustinus* de Jansénius", 229-250 and Colombo (1996).

⁹ Cf. Clement XI's Constitution *Unigenitus Dei Filius* (DS, 2400-2502).

Bañez until the XIX century revival of Thomism (i.e. neo-Thomism), are marked by a strong demarcation between *natura pura* and the *superadditus* gift of grace, or between a formally defined *ordo naturae* and an extrinsic *ordo gratiae*. The basic scheme of this rigid Thomism envisages a two-tiered reality (*duplex ordo*) whereby the lower state of nature exists autonomously and self-sufficiently with regard to a higher sphere of grace, and the latter brings a superadded gift to the former, thus elevating it to a superior degree which, as far as human creatures are concerned, corresponds to the *visio beatifica*. Because of the sharp differentiation between the two orders, this typology is characterised by a thoroughgoing extrinsicism, as if, at least potentially, they could function independently. On the other side of the ontological spectrum, the motif under scrutiny has been argued for in terms of a reciprocal relation between nature and grace, as if the world and the elevating operations of divine dealings with it were part of the same, though composite, order of reality. Much of the XX century rethinking of the relationship between nature and grace, which found its climax in the publication of Henri de Lubac's *Surnaturel* in 1946, has explored different theological paths rather than simply restating the neo-Thomistic grid and has pursued a more holistic theological agenda in attempting to come to terms with the dichotomy under-girding the standard neo-Thomistic version of the relationship between nature and grace. Under the influence of the biblical and patristic *ressourcement* and with the aid of renewed and more dynamic categories of thought,¹⁰ the reconsideration of the *surnaturel* has moved far away from Thomistic formal distinctions and theological concerns. Grace is now being thought of as being immanent to nature whereas nature is being seen as interspersed with grace. In this view which favours a holistic approach, the notion of *natura pura* is categorically rejected in that nature is never considered as mere nature but always as graced nature. La "théologie à deux étages"¹¹ of dualistic Thomism was reframed in terms of a theological framework which is deemed capable of accounting for the horns of

¹⁰ According to Rahner (as Duffy reports, 51-53), three historical factors have fostered this process: the influence of the philosophy of Joseph Maréchal, the historical reconsideration of the gradual affirmation of the natural-supernatural distinction, and the renewed dialogue between Catholic and Protestant theologians. Duffy helpfully surveys the critique of the post-tridentine articulations of nature and grace as well as the magisterium's cautious intervention in the encyclical *Humani Generis* in 1950.

¹¹ The expression is de Lubac's; cf. Vanneste (1996) 13. On de Lubac's watershed reflection on nature and grace, cf. Vanneste, "La théologie du surnaturel dans les écrits de Henri de Lubac", 251-292 and Duffy (1992) 66-84.

the dilemma: a dynamic understanding of nature in which grace is not a superimposed factor together with the safeguarding of the gratuity of grace or, to put it differently, both an in-built, natural desire of creation for grace and a supernatural gift. In this respect, Rahner's words are highly emblematic when he writes that "the grace of God no longer comes (when it does come), steeply on high, from a God absolutely transcending the world, in a manner that is without history, purely episodic; it is permanently in the world in tangible historical form, established in the flesh of Christ as part of the world, of humanity and of its very history".¹²

6.1.1.1.2 Essentialist and Personalist Perspectives

According to an ontological point of view but taking a different perspective, another significant dividing line in the historical development of the Roman Catholic debate on nature and grace can be traced between essentialist and personalist or existentialist approaches to the issue. On the one hand, in the broad patristic tradition nature and grace have been thought of in terms of essence as if they were static substances and abstract objects. In surveying the influence of Graeco-Roman philosophy on the Christian reflection on the topic, Gelpi speaks of an "essence fallacy" whereby ideas of nature and grace have been reified and treated "as objects of thought rather than as modes of perceiving the realities and actualities which the human mind knows".¹³ The whole speculation on *natura pura*, for instance, with all its abstractness and lack of reality, was partly generated by this fallacy which has also fostered a rather unrealistic way of theologising in spite of all its interest for formal neatness. In the history of the articulation of the nature-grace motif, ontological dualism and essentialism have overlapped in significant ways to the extent that when the former has been questioned the latter has also undergone severe criticism. On the other hand, as far as the ontological vision involved in the discussion is concerned, the issue of nature and grace has been reformulated according to radically different conceptual patterns which have introduced an altogether new framework of reference in which the motif is enveloped. In this respect, nature and grace have been interpreted according to categories which reflect the anthropological turn from which both XX century personalist and existential trends of thought derive. The theological focus has become the human person or

¹² Rahner (1963) 15.

¹³ Gelpi (2000) 3.

human existence rather than the substance of an abstract reality dualistically envisioned and this considerable shift has been possible because of a change in the implied ontology. For example, Karl Rahner's programmatic expression introducing a new approach to the old issue, i.e. "supernatural existential", indicates in its language and in the way it highlights an existential concern another ontological vision compared to the essentialism of scholastic Thomism.¹⁴

6.1.1.1.3 Augustinian and Thomistic Traditions

In view of the central thesis of the present research, it will be illuminating to approach the issue from a second standpoint from which it is possible to gain an important insight into the Roman Catholic spectrum of typologies of the relationship between nature and grace. This aspect has to do with the major theological traditions in which the relationship has been argued for, namely the Augustinian and the Thomistic traditions.¹⁵ These theological strands have accompanied the development of the reflection in modern Catholicism, even though a broadly defined Thomism has received stronger magisterial support especially in the XIX and early XX centuries becoming in practice the Roman Catholic theological framework most often referred to.¹⁶ Whereas the Augustinian tradition has been philosophically influenced by a Neo-platonic cultural milieu in its ontology, the Thomistic tradition has emerged from a Christian reinterpretation of Aristotelianism, thus presenting different

¹⁴ Rahner's specific theology of nature and grace can be found in his writings "Concerning the relationship between nature and grace" (1961), *Nature and Grace* (1963). For a critical evaluation, cf. Haight (1979) 119-142; Vandervelde (1975) 107-127 and (1988).

¹⁵ On Augustin, cf. Vanneste, "Nature et grâce dans la théologie de Saint Augustin", pp. 21-48; on the Augustinian tradition, cf. Gelpi (2000) 54-65. On Thomas and Thomism, cf. Spiazzi (1991), Haight (1979) 54-78; Pesch (2000); Gelpi (2000) 67-87.

¹⁶ The magisterial preference for Thomistic categories was epitomised with the 1879 encyclical *Aeterni Patris* by Leo XIII, after which, according to Gelpi, "Catholic theologians felt constrained to think in Thomistic categories until the Second Vatican Council sanctioned greater speculative pluralism in the theological community"; Gelpi (2000) 110. The important issue concerning the degree of continuity/discontinuity between Thomas and Thomism cannot be explored here. Suffice it to note Henri de Lubac's comment about the "ambivalence" of Thomas' thought and its "équilibre instable" which has made the dualism and extrinsicism of his post-tridentine interpreters possible (quoted by Vanneste, "Le problème du surnaturel", 169). The Augustinian tradition shaped pre-modern magisterial pronouncements like the 416 Council of Carthage (DS, 221-230) and the 529 Council

emphases and concerns when it comes to articulate the nature-grace motif. Moreover, Augustine's fight against Pelagianism has given a pessimistic thrust to his thought, while Thomas' reflection is somewhat marked by a certain optimism. The difference between the two traditions in terms of ontological frameworks, theological contexts and historical backgrounds can account for Vanneste's view according to which, as for the necessity of grace which is a central theme of the wider issue of nature and grace, "le Docteur angélique pose la question dans une optique presque diamétralement opposée à celle de l'évêque d'Hippone".¹⁷ As the original matrixes are so different, the traditions which stemmed from Augustine and Thomas bear witness to a persistent diversity in terms of theological accents and attitudes. More specifically, whereas the Augustinian tradition has stressed the concept of *natura vitata*, therefore underlining the pervasive and corrupting reality of sin and the utter primacy of grace, the Thomistic tradition has instead insisted on the inner resources of nature's *capacitas dei*, giving a more positive account of its intrinsic disposition towards the elevating operations of grace. Both traditions, in spite of their theological and historical importance, are not representative of the whole system which is not exclusively Augustinian, nor exclusively Thomistic. The Roman Catholic system provides a sufficiently capable platform which can host both, while not being totally identified nor identifiable with anyone of them. This is another significant pointer to the catholicity of the system itself.

The Roman Catholic broad tradition presents a rich and complex typology of ways in which the relationship between nature and grace has been and continues to be thought of. This briefly sketched survey suggests that the Roman Catholic system contains different options which co-exist within its catholic horizon, with some tensions and unresolved polarizations, while contributing to the comprehensiveness of the system. The magisterial office tends to synthesise different orientations and to safeguard the system from being attacked by disruptive trends which would alter its basic tenets and structures. The nature-grace horizon reflects the catholicity of the system: its sheer diversity and its fundamental unity. A systemic approach to Roman

of Orange (DS, 373-377) which condemned Pelagianism and Semi-pelagianism, respectively.

¹⁷ Vanneste, "La nécessité de la grâce selon Saint Augustin et selon Saint Thomas", 293. The thrust of the whole article is a theological comparison of the two approaches.

Catholicism needs to address the nature-grace schema conscious of its manifold, yet unitary, outlook.

6.1.1.2 The Theological Issues Involved as far as an Evangelical Perspective on Roman Catholicism as a System is Concerned

The recognition of the centrality of the issue of nature and grace in order to approach Roman Catholicism in systemic terms, together with the realisation of the fact that the Roman Catholic system presents a variety of solutions to the problem, are not in themselves sufficient to shape a theological evaluation of the system from an Evangelical viewpoint. They are only the first basic steps which are nonetheless only preliminary to the theological assessment which should seek to single out the issues that, from the perspective of an Evangelical critique, are foundational in its systemic understanding of Roman Catholicism.

As has been suggested earlier, the Roman Catholic system contains a plurality of different articulations of the relationship between nature and grace which, in spite of their historical and theological characteristics, nonetheless have a legitimate place within the theological domain provided by the system itself. Because of the *et-et* epistemological apparatus of the system and in view of its ambitious project, no single model excludes all others, even though, historically speaking, there have been times when one model has been predominant (e.g. Thomism) or, on the other hand, severely questioned (e.g. the criticism of the 1950 encyclical *Humani Generis* to trends stemming from the *Nouvelle Théologie*). Because of the “catholic” thrust of the system, all of them contribute in different ways to its multifaceted universality and tendency towards expansion. Apart from references to the regulative principle and the inner strength and vision of the system, the possibility of the more or less harmonious co-existence of different typologies also has a theological basis which a systemic approach should give weight to and try to investigate. In other words, the question to be asked is why and in what ways the different typologies enjoy a significant degree of theological compatibility within the comprehensive horizon of Roman Catholicism. Strictly related to this is also the question of the criteria of inclusion within the spectrum of legitimate Roman Catholic typologies and, conversely, the criteria of exclusion from it. What allows, indeed demands, integration within the system is also what prevents it from absorbing alien motifs which would radically alter its outlook. The issue has an important bearing on the

attempt to come to terms with the theological dividing line between Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism because it tries to highlight the way in which differing understandings of the nature-grace relationship lead to different basic orientations of the two systems.

6.1.1.2.1 *The Openness of Nature*

In a preliminary way with regard to subsequent points, the very theological language in which Roman Catholicism addresses the issue of nature and grace indicates, at least *in nuce*, a theological programme running in the way the basic terms of its framework are envisaged and expressed. The accepted, standard terminology of the first element of the relationship, i.e. the semantic field of “nature”, leads into a theological domain which is perfectly grafted into Roman Catholicism and organically built into it, but which appears to be rather idiosyncratic to the Evangelical tradition in general and to the Kuyperian perspective in particular, which has been referred to in order to ground historically an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism. Following the well established patristic tradition concerning the use of “nature” as a theological and philosophical reference point, Roman Catholicism has gone on to develop a whole cluster of theological categories, which have become utterly quintessential to its theology, e.g. “natural law” and “natural theology”, which, on the contrary, Protestant theology has always struggled to understand and appreciate, far less use. If it is true that the Reformation tradition has always reasoned theologically along broadly defined Augustinian lines in which the term “nature” is used to refer to the created order, seen nonetheless through a Neo-Platonic lens, it is also arguable that the magisterial Reformers were reluctant to follow Augustine’s linguistic categories slavishly while substantially agreeing with his basic conceptual framework concerning *natura integra*, *natura vitiata*, and *natura reparata*.¹⁸ In briefly surveying the way in which the theology of nature is argued for in Luther, Calvin and Melanchthon, TeSelle comments that “the Reformers were wary of too much speculation on such matters as the vision of God, so central to the Catholic discussion of nature and grace, either because of their

¹⁸ In this respect, Duffy (1992) 17 argues that “the Augustinian understanding of nature employed by Protestant thinkers is more fluid than the substantialist understanding found in Catholic thought”. The Augustinian thrust of the Reformation thought is particularly underlined by McGrath (1987) and (1988); Oberman and James (1991).

philosophical caution or because of the Bible's reticence".¹⁹ This comment is also valid as far as the more general treatment of their philosophical theology of nature is concerned. The Reformation brought about the gradual break up of the linguistic theological consensus in the West concerning nature, even though such a breach is not clear-cut and definitive but has different nuances and degrees of depth depending on individual theologians and theological traditions. While all the Reformers "were animated by the same concern with the personal relation of man to God", each of them "made his own selection from the vocabulary furnished by the past and did not always bother to refine the language to the point that it would give an accurate reflection of his assumptions".²⁰ Instead of the Roman Catholic scholastic tendency to employ rather substantialist categories, Protestant theology has generally argued more in terms of loosely definable relational ones in which a "nature" understood in terms of essence is difficult to understand and accept.

On the whole, then, though stemming from a reinterpretation of the legacy of Augustine where the theology of "nature" has an important place and where the language of "nature" is used in a thoroughgoing way, the Evangelical tradition has generally been reticent about using the same vocabulary with the same consistency and conviction, and about crafting a theology of nature following the Augustinian path, particularly on account of the philosophical reminiscences and associations of that theology. It has gradually departed from using the language of nature and the theology it implied, preferring to develop its understanding of the created world in terms of creation. Moreover, in the case of the Kuyperian Neo-Calvinist tradition, the reticence inherited from the Reformers becomes a deliberate choice to make use of an alternative language in order to express a different understanding of the reality conveyed by the term "nature". Kuyper and the line of thought encouraged by him prefer to employ the more biblically grounded term of "creation", or related expressions such as "creation order", "created order", "creation ordinances",²¹ thus re-framing the whole of the Neo-Calvinist theological framework in terms of

¹⁹ TeSelle (1971) 551. The section of the article dealing with the Reformers' approach to the theology of nature includes pp. 551-559. Similar comments are found in Duffy (1992) 16-17. The issues evoked by TeSelle raise the whole question on the relationship between the Reformers and Scholastic methodology and language which is addressed much thoroughly by Van Asselt and Dekker (2001). More specifically: on Luther, cf. Andreatta (1996) and Bagchi (1999); on Calvin, cf. Kaiser (1988) and Steinmetz (1999); finally, on Melanchthon, cf. Bellucci (1998).

²⁰ TeSelle (1971) 556.

creation-language rather than nature-language, as is ordinary in the case of Roman Catholicism. While the language of the Reformers concerning nature is still loose and fluid, the Neo-Calvinist tradition reinforces the use of an alternative linguistic set of categories which tends to become progressively more technical and indicates a significantly different point of departure for theological reflection and the orientation of its worldview. If the Reformers were somewhat uneasy in using of the language of nature, the Neo-Calvinist tradition has further increased its distance from even the Roman Catholic way of naming the basic motif of the Christian faith. In this respect, TeSelle argues, with the danger of overstating the case while underlining one of its characterising features, that the relationship between nature and grace is "perhaps the only theological topic in which Catholic and Protestant thought have gone their own ways, passing like ships in the night, with no sense of common problems and standards of judgement".²² This is a remarkable point which a systemic approach must take into account.

The issue at stake, of course, is not merely linguistic, as if the use of one specific term instead of another would be enough in itself to cause a completely different orientation of the respective theologies. The problem of the adequacy of language and concept forms in theology is perennial and is an on-going challenge for theological investigation within any theological tradition. The point at issue is a fundamentally theological one which has far-reaching implications and consequences for an Evangelical evaluation of Roman Catholicism. In fact, the Evangelical progressive departure from, and, in the end, replacement of the language of nature expresses a theological critique concerning the legitimacy of that usage and the theological price which is paid in employing it. The place of "nature" in the nature-grace motif is strategic in that it represents the pole which grace is linked to in its elevating power, in such a way that the way in which grace is understood heavily depends on one's understanding of nature. The reverse is also true but the point is that the decision to start from a philosophically defined "nature", which is tentatively

²¹ On this cluster of expressions in Neo-Calvinism, cf. Skillen (1980).

²² TeSelle (1971) 540. As an example of this reciprocal extraneity, TeSelle recalls that XVI century pre-tridentine discussions between Roman Catholics and Protestants "concerned indulgences and not nature and grace" (*ibidem*). Thematically, it may be true that the controversy majored in the practice of indulgences, though, theologically speaking, the issue of indulgences is strictly related to that of nature and grace. Even not talking specifically on nature and grace,

christianised *a posteriori*, is a premise which influences very significantly the whole of the system, both in its understanding of reality and its appreciation of divine grace. Considering the foundational role of nature in the nature-grace relationship, the theological horizon of the Roman Catholic system is built on a basic element which, according to an Evangelical point of view, is a theological problem because of its derivation from two broad philosophical traditions, i.e. Neo-Platonism in the case of Augustinianism and Aristotelianism in the case of Thomism, which have not undergone an overall and radical reshaping according to what the Evangelical tradition would say are the biblical terms of creation. Even the Roman Catholic contemporary reinterpretation of "nature" in terms of immanent concerns and existential categories is a further development of the same train of thought expressed in previous understandings of nature. The basic categories have changed significantly, but the strategy of absorbing and catholicising what comes from outside remains the same.

The outcome is that the whole worldview which the Roman Catholic system represents and embodies is construed on a flawed theological basis which heavily conditions the articulation of the ground-motif. The Evangelical systemic approach underlines the fact that building a whole system on a "nature" defined in this way is a structural fault of the Roman Catholic system, which is evident in every expression of the system itself and characterises its whole outlook. The problem is not merely linguistic but, more broadly and poignantly, a problem of theological method and programme: both the regulative principle of the system whereby it is always in the process of adding foreign elements to its already inclusive synthesis, and its comprehensive project whereby it pursues the progressive expansion of its borders, are envisaged in this choice. It is interesting but hardly surprisingly that the Roman Catholic system thinks of reliance on "nature" as being an organic and essential part of the system itself, one which indicates something deep in its very fabric and evokes its most profound essence. The inclusion of "nature" in the basic bipolar scheme of reference shows its high degree of catholicity, making it capable of coming to terms with a philosophically defined "nature" which is then considered as being a fundamental pillar of its worldview, even though it needs to be elevated by

their relationship is always implied and therefore the XVI century diatribes may be seen in the light of it.

supernatural grace which can either be super-added to nature or found within its sphere.

The contrast is marked by the fact that if the Roman Catholic system assumes “nature” and catholicises it *a posteriori*, the Evangelical one would question its pre-defined connotation *a priori*, choosing to start with a revelationally attested “creation” with its theocentric focus and providential thrust. Of course, the Evangelical meaning of creation does not exclude what is conveyed in part by the Roman Catholic understanding of nature; on the contrary, there are important parallels and some overlapping, indeed, these terms can be used as synonyms if nature is considered as the primordial state of the world and humanity. Granted their semantic contiguity, the two terms nonetheless indicate the patterns of the respective strategies in coming to terms with the natural or created world. A significantly different perception of the realm of “nature”, expressed linguistically but pointing beyond linguistic peculiarities, indicates, on the one hand, the gnoseological and epistemological openness of the Roman Catholic system which is programmatically searching outside its circle for whatever can enrich and expand it, and its overall positive attitude towards what is natural; on the other hand, it shows the Evangelical tendency of qualifying its categories and linguistic tools in terms of those which are biblically attested while pursuing an ambivalent approach towards what is defined in terms of nature: uneasiness when it conveys an extra-biblical significance, adherence when is used as a synonym for creation.

As far as the gnoseological and epistemological levels are concerned, the Evangelical system pursues a different type of catholicity in that it stresses the need for a preliminary radical critique of whatever comes from “nature” in the light of a strictly revelational set of criteria.

6.1.1.2.2 The Hamartiological Gap

After beginning to sketch out the systemic concerns emerging from the analysis of the Roman Catholic relationship between nature-grace which revolves around the category of “nature”, a step further is needed in order to grasp theologically the full weight of what is implied in the Roman Catholic use of it. Reference has been made to a composite typology of nature-grace motifs which are found in Roman Catholicism and the theological critique concerns the whole of its spectrum. In fact, notwithstanding the theological and historical differences, each and every motif

which is part of the Roman Catholic system is inserted and maintained within it because of a common theological root from which they all emerge. From a systemic point of view, it is arguable that all types presuppose a substantial continuity between the order of nature and that of grace. The articulation of that continuity differs considerably from the mere juxtapositioning of the Thomistic tradition to the dynamic interaction envisaged by the *Nouvelle Théologie* and subsequent Catholic reflection reinvigorated by it. Both in the case of the extrinsic understanding which postulates a *natura pura* and grace as *donum super additum*, and the immanent train of thought which argues for an intrinsically graced nature, the spheres of nature and grace, either juxtaposed or overlapped, are nonetheless in theological continuity in the sense that there is a constitutive and irreversible link between them which sin, whatever its negative consequences, has not and cannot sever. The Roman Catholic system is therefore based on a bipolar scheme in which nature is related to grace but where sin, though taken seriously, is nonetheless included in the sphere of nature, and in its negative effects are therefore relativised. For the Roman Catholic system, nature includes creation and sin, without giving to sin the same weight that the Neo-Calvinist tradition gives to it. As for the latter, the scheme is not nature-grace but the tri-polar one of creation-sin-redemption, thus making sin a fundamental element of the worldview which makes it impossible for it to be overlooked or absorbed in a slightly modified nature.²³ Roman Catholicism is based on the on-going protological continuity between nature and grace whereas the Protestant tradition which Kuyper represents has introduced an element of hamartiological discontinuity between nature and grace whereby nature is no longer considered as mere nature, not even an intrinsically graced nature, but always as a dramatically disrupted nature which needs to be restored by grace. In this view, nature is thought of as having experienced a radical breach at the fall and, in its post-fall outlook, which is the only historically real context in which creation finds itself, it cannot be anything but fallen nature. The difference between the two systems revolves around differing understandings of nature and sin, and sin's impact on nature. The Roman Catholic system subsumes sin into nature which becomes wounded nature, but, in spite of the wound brought about by sin, it still recognises the unaltered status of nature in terms of its inherent *capacitas* for grace, and maintains the continuity established protologically between

²³ On the tri-polar scheme Creation-Fall-Redemption, cf. Wolters (1983), Van der Walt (1978) and (1994), Walsh and Middleton (1984), de Coninck (1991).

nature and grace which sin has not disentangled and cannot disentangle.²⁴ All Roman Catholic typologies of the nature-grace relationship basically agree on nature's *capacitas* for grace which is tainted by sin, but is not restrained from being continually open to grace and grasped by it. The Evangelical point of view is that the hamartiological breach which occurred at the fall has a significance which is much more far-reaching than a mere wound or stain: in this tradition, sin has a far more serious theological status which impinges on the whole orientation of its worldview, to the extent that nature has definitively lost that inner capacity to correspond with divine grace and has radically changed its protological status into a sin-driven, and utterly corrupted reality. The seriousness with which sin is considered is shown by the fact that between creation and redemption there is the breach of the fall which, because of the *corruptio totalis* brought by it, becomes a constituent part of the overarching scheme. The fall stands between creation and redemption historically in the sense that it occurred after creation, but the historical link also has a theological thrust in that, in its post-fallen outlook, creation cannot be thought of apart from the perspective of the fall and the same is true as far as redemption is concerned. Creation is therefore a fallen creation which has irreversibly lost its primordial prerogatives and exists in a state of separation from God, incapable of restoring the relationship in its own strength, nor is it even willing to do so. The Evangelical insistence that, in order to shape a Christian worldview, it is vitally important to take the disastrous effects of the fall very seriously is nothing but a re-elaboration of the Augustinian theme concerning the antithesis between sin and grace, set in the context of a post-XVI century Protestant theological framework. According to Hermann Bavinck, a leading Neo-Calvinist theologian of the XX century who captures this Augustinian tenet, "grace does not serve to take man up into a supernatural order, but to liberate him from sin. Grace is not opposed to nature, but only to sin ... The physical opposition of natural and supernatural is replaced by the ethical one of sin and grace".²⁵

It is true that Kuyper and the subsequent Neo-Calvinist tradition make two important theological qualifications to the acknowledgement of the gravity of the

²⁴ For contemporary magisterial presentations of the Roman Catholic doctrine of sin, cf. *Gaudium et spes*, 13. The 1992 *Catechism of the Catholic Church* deals with the doctrine of the fall at §§ 385-412. In the context of the exposition of man's vocation, the doctrine of sin is also briefly evoked at §§ 1846-1869. On the present-day discussion in Roman Catholic theological circles, cf. Vandervelde (1975).

morass brought about and perpetuated by sin. These remarks are necessary in order not to confuse the Protestant rigour in coming to terms with the reality of sin with a resurgence of a manichean dualistic tendency in envisaging the relationship between a holy God and a sinful world in terms of an ontological opposition.²⁶ The first qualification has to do with the doctrine of “common grace” which is a foundational pillar of this tradition in its understanding of God’s dealings with a fallen creation. “Common grace” is seen as that providential grace extended to all creatures which preserves life and enables culture to develop, in spite of the pervasive disruption brought about by sin, and it is distinguished from “special grace” which is salvific and lavished upon the elect according to a covenantal pattern.²⁷ The theological rationale of the doctrine is that the historical occurrence of the fall and the entering of sin into the world do not prevent God from exercising his grace so that the world can run its course and pursue its calling. Without the on-going outworking of common grace, the world would immediately cease to exist. However, common grace, while restraining to a certain extent the outworking of sin, is not redemptive in itself. The recognition of the common grace of God, however, does not detract from the theological assessment of the fall as the beginning of an alienating orientation of creation and of sin as the condition in which creation finds itself in without any possibility of reversing the trend or bypassing it. The other significant qualification of the doctrine of sin which is basic to the Neo-Calvinist scheme of creation-fall-redemption is that, according to this tradition, the fall has altered the “direction” of creation, rather than its “structure”.²⁸ In other words, the moral and spiritual dimensions have been irreversibly and totally damaged by the fall whereas the ontological setting of creation has been preserved from being disrupted by it. An example of the way in which such a distinction between “direction” and “structure”

²⁵ Quoted by Veenhof (1968) 9.

²⁶ The very insistence of the Reformation on the complete sinfulness of men and on the radicality of grace may give rise to some questions, though it has to be readily acknowledged that these Reformation emphases are placed in an anti-dualistic theological framework. The anti-dualistic thrust of the Reformation thought, which stands in continuity with historic orthodoxy, is argued for by Rostagno (1996) according to whom the Reformation does not reopen the problem of dualism which was solved in the patristic age but builds on that assumption by underlining the extreme seriousness of sin.

²⁷ On the theology of common grace in Neo-Calvinism, cf. Kuyper (1902-1905); Bavinck (1989); Murray (1977); Van Til (1954), Macleod (1995); Klapwijk (1991). On the relationship between common and special grace, cf. Berkhof (1958) 434-443.

²⁸ The point is laboured forcefully by Wolters (1985).

operates in the field of anthropology has to do with the doctrine of *imago dei* whereby, at the fall, man has lost moral freedom and spiritual life while retaining his imprint as creature made in the image of God. The Protestant doctrine of *depravatio homini* indicates the degree of guilty separation from God which mankind experiences as a result of the fall even though he is still the image of God. In arguing for “common grace” and in distinguishing between the affected “direction” and the preserved “structure” of creation, the Kuyperian perspective safeguards its worldview from falling back into an ontologically dualistic scheme, while enabling it to assess critically the Roman Catholic nature-grace motif.

Apart from being characterised by a linguistic and categorial openness attributed to nature, the Roman Catholic system does not contemplate a tragic doctrine of sin whereby fallen nature is no longer the created world which was formed in the beginning, rather it does present a mitigated theology of sin whereby the fallen nature is still potentially capable of being elevated by grace or inhabited by it. The Roman Catholic nature-grace schema, with its polarity between the two constitutive parts, reveals an underestimation of sin as a foundational element for a Christian worldview which is instead retained in the creation-fall-redemption one. An Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism makes it possible to see this non-tragic view of sin in every expression of the system.

6.1.1.2.3 The Synergy Between Nature and Grace

Another important observation which is closely related to the different appreciation of nature and sin has to do with the understanding of grace within the Roman Catholic typologies of nature and grace. An overall positive posture towards nature, coupled with a mild concept of sin, leads to a corresponding vision of grace. Whether it is the elevating grace of the traditional Thomistic framework whereby grace leads nature to its supernatural end, or the humanising grace of the XX century re-thinking of the relationship whereby grace operates within nature itself in order to make it achieve its full potential, the Roman Catholic system is governed by an understanding of grace which relies on the inalienable *capacitas* of nature to be elevated or humanised. Grace begins in nature in both cases in the sense that in nature it finds a receptive attitude and potential resources which it can make use of in its operations. Nature always participates in grace whereas grace always presupposes the *ad intra* ability of nature to be stirred by it and co-operate with it. Even the extrinsic view of

the most rigid Thomism still postulates that the super-added gift of grace relies on the inner resources of nature of making it possible for it to be elevated to its supernatural end. The continuity between nature and grace allows the contiguity or the mutual involvement between the forces of nature and those of grace. According to the Roman Catholic system, the methodology of grace always involves the participation of nature and the active collaboration of the latter in the outworking of the former.

The Evangelical perception of grace is significantly different in that it portrays it as a medicinal agency which brings life to a corrupted nature and salvation to a lost world. In Duffy's terms, according to the Reformers, "the function of grace is primarily redemptive or medicinal"²⁹ in the sense that it liberates creation from the full depravity which characterises its whole orientation which is not what it was intended to be, but which nature is unable to change. Grace cannot but operate *ad extra* with regard to nature because nature is so entrenched in sin to the point of not even being fully aware of its reprobate state, and only an external, unilateral operation of divine grace can redeem what is completely lost. Nothing that pertains to sinful nature is deemed to be capable of contributing to grace and the whole thrust of the Protestant "*sola gratia*" stresses the monergistic view of salvation whereas "*sola fides*" points to the dividing line between the Protestant discontinuity between a sinful world and restoring grace and the Roman Catholic continuity between the flawed yet still substantially integral nature and elevating or humanising grace.

6.1.1.2.4 Systemic Procedures

The Evangelical theological critique of the Roman Catholic articulation of the nature-grace motif revolves around its language and the theological implications of that language for a Christian worldview, its bipolar structure which underestimates the tragedy of the fall and subsumes it into the category of nature, and the continuity established between the orders of nature and grace whereby nature is inherently open to grace and grace always seeks the participation of nature. This framework is clearly underlined in the previously sketched out understandings of Roman Catholicism especially elaborated by theologians like Guardini.³⁰

²⁹ The contrast between the "elevating" understanding of grace and the "medicinal" one is briefly commented upon by Duffy (1992) 16-17.

³⁰ Cf. 5.2, 167-172.

To the Roman Catholic nature-grace scheme so articulated, such a critique would also propose an alternative motif centred on the tri-polar scheme of creation-fall-redemption whereby the reference to creation expresses the strategic choice of conforming its patterns of thought to the categories expounded by biblical revelation (i.e. “*sola Scriptura*”), the insertion of sin is a recognition of the dramatic, total depravity which the fall has led creation into, and the specification of grace as redemptive is an indication of the medicinal dimension of God’s dealings with the fallen world. The radical difference resides at the systemic level, in the very fabric of the respective systems. Since the nature-grace motif is at the very heart of the Roman Catholic system, its theological consequences affect all manifestations of the system which are organically related to its core. In the area of theological gnoseology and epistemology, it is programmatically open towards all truth wherever it comes from and whatever form it assumes, provided that it is filtered by the gnoseological and epistemological apparatus of the system and that it does not modify its basic structure.³¹ From an anthropological viewpoint, the Roman Catholic system strongly advocates a thoroughgoing humanistic, yet moderate, optimism regarding man’s ability to be stirred by grace and to co-operate in its elevating process towards the full discovery or recovery of the supernatural end. As far as soteriology is concerned, it is characterised by the firm conviction that man can and has to contribute to salvation in a synergistic process initiated and governed by grace, even though the input of human agency is necessary in order to attain salvation.³²

³¹ In this respect, the 1998 encyclical *Fides et ratio* is a typical example of the Roman Catholic way of working out the relationship between faith and reason. Against the background of a Thomistic framework, which is defined as the “highest synthesis that human thinking has ever reached” (78), the magisterial document defends the view according to which “reason” has an autonomous sphere (13, 15, 67, 73, 75, 77, 79, 106) which “faith” respects even though, only through the eyes of faith, can reason overcome the perils of becoming rationalistic or irrational, which are opposite yet opposite dangers. On «Fides et ration», cf. Neuhaus (1998), Jaeger (1999), and O’Regan (2000).

³² This soteriological activism is also expressed in the Roman Catholic doctrine of justification which needs to be grasped from the perspective of the relationship between nature and grace. The ecumenical dialogue on the issue, from Hans Küng’s pivotal assessment of Karl Barth to the 1999 Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration, has cleared up many important points concerning biblical exegesis, historical context, confessional background, theological vocabulary, patterns of thought, etc., but only by tackling it as stemming from a different articulation of the motif can it be as ecumenically fruitful as theologically wise. On the history of the doctrine, cf. McGrath (1986). On Küng’s interpretation of Barth’s doctrine, cf. McGrath (1981) and Hart (1993). As for the 1999 Lutheran-Roman Catholic Joint Declaration, some

As Karl Barth has convincingly pointed out, all the theological strands of Roman Catholicism are summed up and presented in its magnificent Mariology where “the critical, central dogma of the Roman Catholic Church” is to be found.³³ The Roman Catholic epistemological openness, its trust in man’s abilities, and its overall reliance on the possibility of human co-operation all converge in the articulated theology regarding the biblically sober figure of Mary. In this respect, Mariology expresses, therefore, the quintessential characteristics of the Roman Catholic nature-grace motif. But the same degree of correspondence between the core and the manifestations of the system can be argued for in any and every Roman Catholic phenomenon or doctrine which is taken under scrutiny. What is supremely true in the case of Mariology is also true, but in different degrees of evidence, for any and every dimension of the system. Since every aspect is related to the centre of the system, it conveys its qualifying marks. Besides theological areas and doctrinal concerns, the nature-grace scheme is also supremely important for an understanding of what in the previous chapter has been referred to as the “catholicity of the system”.³⁴ Every aspect of this type of catholicity which has been highlighted in that section is theologically feasible only within the horizon of the Roman Catholic ground-motif: its unity is grounded in the finality of grace over nature and the hope of nature to attain the *visio beatifica*; its dynamics is possible because of the limited yet active resources of nature and the empowering input of grace; its project is as wide as the goal of grace to elevate and humanise nature; its regulative principle serves the programmatic openness of the system towards an ever broader synthesis; finally, its structures reflect the possibility for nature to co-operate with grace in the accomplishment of its graceful purposes. The system is clearly based on the Roman Catholic versions of the relationship between nature and grace.

Earlier on in the chapter, reference was made to the fact that the theological horizon provided by the nature-grace motif makes it possible for many articulations of the relationship to be accepted by the system itself whereas other versions which historically emerged within the same Roman Catholic tradition have been rejected by it. Obviously, then, the system is able to discern which renderings of the motif are

Evangelical comments can be found in Greiner (2000), Berrocal (2000), Godfrey (2000), De Chirico (2000), Sweeney (2000), and Estrada (2001)

³³ K. Barth, *K.D.*, I,2, p. 157 (ET: *C.D.*, I,2, p. 143). A similar perspective on Mariology as condensing the whole of Roman Catholic theology and piety, cf. Subilia (1967) 68-75.

compatible with the overall orientation and can further expand its catholicity, and the options which, on the contrary, are not suitable and do not tend to be included in the synthesis. The theological set of criteria for the inclusion of a version of the nature-grace motif into the comprehensive synthesis of the Roman Catholic system is determined by the degree of compatibility of the given version with the theological horizon based on such a relationship. As was suggested in dealing with the regulative principle of the Roman Catholic system,³⁵ the over-arching *et-et* pattern has its own logic which allows it to expand the synthesis whenever the addition serves the cause of the system, but also to reject it whenever the new insertion runs against its catholicity. Borrowing Möhler's terms, it can be asserted that the system clearly distinguishes the acceptable difference which contributes to its catholic polyphony (*Gegensatz*) from the opposition which disrupts its plural unity (*Widerspruch*).³⁶ At this point, it might be useful to touch on the historical cases in which the system has taken a definitive position with regard to alternative versions of the then standard nature-grace schema. If the XVI century refusal of Baianism was primarily based on the charge that "Baius denied any distinction between the natural and the supernatural orders", the XVII century condemnation of the Jansenist theses, while reinforcing the rejection of a previously condemned Pelagian over-optimism, expressed "Rome's refusal to endorse Augustinian pessimism in any form".³⁷ The theological criteria which led the system to outlaw Baius and Jansenius are different in terms of doctrinal themes but convergent in terms of the overall objective: both the denial of the distinction between the orders and extreme pessimism are incompatible with the basic thrust of the system which maintains a polarity between nature and grace, and which is inspired by a moderately optimistic and a non-deterministic orientation. The criteria of inclusion and exclusion were also operative at the time of the controversy caused by the Protestant Reformation. In this respect, the canons and decrees of the Council of Trent can be thought of as being the adapted and renewed reaffirmation of the Roman Catholic traditional articulation of the nature-grace motif,³⁸ and the rejection of the "solisms" introduced by the Reformers which aimed at reshaping that foundational motif in the light of "sola Scriptura", "sola gratia",

³⁴ Cf. 5.3, 172-181.

³⁵ Cf. 5.3.4, 178-179.

³⁶ Quoted by Sesboüé (1987) 4.

³⁷ Both quotations are taken from Gelpi (2000), respectively, 103 and 106.

³⁸ Cf. Haight (1979) 105-117.

“sola fides”, “solus Christus”, and “soli Deo gloria”. These “solisms” were considered as dangerous threats for the stability of the system because of their epistemological narrowness compared to the openness of the nature-grace schema, their anthropological pessimism compared to the Roman Catholic moderate optimism, and the soteriological unilateralism compared to the synergism envisaged by the traditional outlook of the same schema. With his usual theological acumen and irony, John Henry Newman aptly summarised the sharp difference in terms of size and shape when he commented that “the Catholic doctrine is after all too great to be comfortably accommodated in a Protestant nutshell”.³⁹

The Roman Catholic nature-grace motif, composite in its outlook yet unitary in its basic tenets, is then the comprehensive theological horizon in which the Roman Catholic system grounds its unity and diversity, attains its universal project, nourishes its expansive dynamics, warrants its regulative principle, and sustains its structures. An Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism cannot fail to address the nature-grace motif as the strategic core in order to assess it theologically and to reflect on the systemic differences between the two traditions. In spite of the many attempts to present a theological evaluation of Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical viewpoint, an Evangelical critique which assumes this systemic perspective and pursues its analysis accordingly has still to be written in a consistent way.

6.1.2 The Church as the Mediator of the Roman Catholic System

Every system has an ideological core which is the defining element of its worldview. All aspects of the system are connected to it as well as being derived from it. The Roman Catholic system is built according to the parameters set by the versions of the nature-grace scheme which have been recognised by the system itself throughout its history. The way in which the relationship between nature and grace is envisaged provides the system with a theological horizon which can account for its complex outlook, inner structure and wider objectives. In seeking to delineate a feasible hermeneutical model for Roman Catholicism, the nature-grace motif, which has just been outlined and critically examined in an introductory way, is in itself an incomplete tool for the shaping of a systemic approach if it is taken in isolation from

³⁹ Newman, “Ignorance Concerning Catholics the Protection of the Protestant View, *VIII Lecture on the Present Position of Catholics in England*, 1851 (1904 edition) 14.

another fundamental aspect of the Roman Catholic system which plays a decisive role in its overall economy. What is sociologically distinctive and theologically quintessential for the system is the place given to the nature, structure, and mission of the Church, which are all intertwined in the Roman Catholic view of the prerogatives of the Church itself. Indeed, Roman Catholicism would be utterly indecipherable without taking into account the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church within the overall framework of the nature-grace motif. It would not be Catholicism with its universal breadth and historical length, nor Roman Catholicism with its local specification and juridical profile. Without the Church, Roman Catholicism would be essentially different. The same is true as far as the tenets and the overall outlook of the Roman Catholic system are concerned. Without the centrality attributed to the Church, its catholicity would lose its universal agent and therefore decrease significantly its degree of catholicity, its unity would become somewhat ethereal and more idealistic, its dynamism would lose its potential efficacy, its project would see its ambitious goal substantially curtailed, its regulative principle would become more arbitrary without a regulative body capable of applying it, its structures would be progressively detached from the organic bond which keeps the system from becoming a mere institutional network. So, the nature-grace motif is the theological basis of the system, but, in order for the system to be accounted for in the very fabric of its worldview, it is necessary to examine the ecclesiological question of the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church. Between the orders of nature and grace, a mediating subject is needed to represent nature to grace and grace to nature, so that nature will progressively and more fully be graced and grace will eventually achieve its final goal of elevating nature. That mediation is the theological *raison d'être* of the Roman Catholic Church *per se* and the chief role of the Church within the wider Roman Catholic system.

6.1.2.1 The Law of Incarnation as the Theological Background of the Mediation of the Church

As has already been argued, the Roman Catholic articulations of the nature-grace motif call for, indeed, demand a mediation between the two orders. From the Roman Catholic perspective, the two spheres are formally distinct, even though they are intimately and inextricably connected. The connection is made possible by an agency which shares both the aspirations of nature and the operations of grace. As Kuyper

reminded his listeners in the 1898 Stone Lectures, while Calvinism advocates the immediacy of the relationship between God and the elect, Romanism thinks of that relationship, which is not focussed on the redeemed only but extends to the whole of nature, in terms of “mediate communion” whereby the Church is thought of as standing between God and the world, representing God before the world and the world before God.⁴⁰ Kuyper’s way of describing this opposition might seem to require some qualification in order to account for the place given to mediation within Calvinism (e.g. the preaching of the Word and the administration of the sacraments) and the importance of immediacy within Roman Catholicism (e.g. the encouragement of private prayer). The contrast is not as clear-cut as Kuyper would seem to suggest, even though the general point of the difference between the Calvinist emphasis on a direct relation and the Catholic stress on a mediate one is to be retained as indicating a basic difference in the way the two traditions understand God’s dealings with the world and vice versa. The Roman Catholic insistence on the need for mediation between nature and grace is pervasive in its worldview and Catholic ecclesiology is an attempt to provide a theological rationale for its very existence in terms of the divine-human agent that enacts the mediation. Moreover, the Roman Catholic warrant for the theological necessity of mediation, far from being a merely manipulative device in order to justify the rather impressive place accorded to the Church within the system, is written into the very heart of both the Catholic concept of the essence of nature which is deemed to be ontologically open to elevation, and the mystery of grace which comes to nature in the historically concrete forms which convey it. Mediation, then, is an ontological necessity which derives both from the thoroughgoing openness of nature and the embodied patterns of grace. Because nature is not grace, though *capax* of it, it needs a bridge which must be part of nature and yet capable of being a vehicle of grace. Conversely, because grace is not nature, though destined to it, it needs a channel which derives from grace and leads it to nature. Nature must be opened to be graced whereas grace must come in forms which are connatural to nature; none of the two can achieve its purpose independently from the intervention of a mediating agency which brings about the encounter. Within the Roman Catholic nature-grace schemes, the mediating link between nature and grace which makes the interchange possible is not occasional and secondary, but absolutely fundamental if the scheme is not to become

⁴⁰ Cf. 5.1.1.2, especially 160-161.

a monistic framework in which nature and grace are confused and intermingled, nor a dualistic one where nature and grace are simply juxtaposed without any real interaction. Such mediation is called for by the nature-grace motif and provides the theological ground for the Church to understand its nature and mission. The Roman Catholic Church, in fact, thinks of herself as the mediating agency between nature and grace.

As mediation is part of the economy of nature and grace, it is closely related to the incarnation of the Son of God where it is supremely worked out. Thinking of the way in which grace works in nature, Yves Congar recalls that Péguy had spoken of the “law of Incarnation” as the pattern through which grace meets nature and nature receives grace.⁴¹ In this sense, the incarnation is the divinely appointed meeting point of nature and grace. Its basic pattern surpasses the particularity of the historical event of the mission of the Jesus Christ and shapes the whole of salvation history, determining the visibility and instrumentality of every act of grace towards nature culminating in the coming of the Eternal Son but also characterising the ongoing service of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church stands in continuity with the incarnation and is the new enactment of the law of Incarnation, being the post-ascension mediating agent which embodies the aspirations of nature and to which the mission of grace to nature is entrusted. According to Congar, the law of Incarnation “ne s’impose pas à Dieu” but it is something that “Dieu a librement choisi de suivre dans l’économie du salut, et en vertu de laquelle, dans le Christ d’abord, dans l’Église ensuite, les dons spirituels nous sont faits selon un mode connaturel à notre humanité et à nos conditions terrestres”. This sentence well summarises the Roman Catholic theological understanding of the law of Incarnation by underlining the freedom of God in choosing the pattern, the primacy of Christ in embodying it, the organic bond between Christ and the Church which continues “ensuite” to follow the same path, and the need for the gifts of grace to come to fruition in a “natural” form. Because it encompasses the Roman Catholic view of the outworking of grace by means of a mediating agent, according to Congar, the theme of the law of Incarnation “est décisif et central pour une ecclésiologie catholique” while Subilia thinks that its thoroughgoing application to the Church is the central dogma of Roman

⁴¹ Congar, “Dogme christologique et ecclésiologie” in *Sainte Église* (1963) 71. The next quotation by Congar is taken from the same source at the same page.

Catholicism.⁴² The mediating agent of the system is essentially an embodied enactment of grace and, at the same time, a graced and gracing representative of nature.

A broadly defined law of incarnation is something that belongs to every classic and orthodox form of Christianity and not exclusively to Roman Catholicism. While it is true that each tradition articulates differently its understanding of this law, the significance of the incarnation of the Son of God is generally thought of as being a divine-human act which is not reducible to a merely historical event. It is rather envisaged as the pattern for the Church to accomplish her mission so that the Christian gospel may be witnessed and practised in concrete, embodied forms in real situations. Even the less sacramentally oriented Evangelical tradition would strongly uphold some kind of law of incarnation resulting in a corresponding theology of mediation, even though it would interpret it in an utterly different way from Roman Catholicism. In this respect, Kuyper is correct in contrasting sharply the prevailing Roman Catholic concept of mediation to the strong Calvinist view of immediacy concerning the relationship between God and the elect, but not entirely fair in opposing the two perspectives in an absolute way as if they were mutually exclusive. The law of incarnation is not central for Roman Catholicism alone, even though, in the Roman Catholic tradition, it is elaborated in a way that is not found in the Protestant tradition, especially as far as ^{THE} strongly Christological connotation of the Roman Catholic theology of the Church is concerned. As will emerge more clearly from the following paragraphs, the Roman Catholic understanding of the law of incarnation establishes a strong link between the incarnation of Christ and the Church as the prolongation of the incarnation whereby the latter acts as *altera persona Christi*, standing therefore between God and the world. Another fundamental feature of the Roman Catholic concept of mediation is the tendentially hierarchical framework within which the mediation is envisaged. This is another qualifying aspect that Kuyper rightly underlined in the 1898 Stone Lectures when he stressed that the Roman Catholic worldview is marked by a hierarchical orientation in its understanding of the relationship between the higher sphere of grace and the lower sphere of nature.⁴³ In turn, according to Kuyper, this hierarchical orientation is also reproduced within the sphere of nature whereby society is thought of as being

⁴² Subilia (1967) 59-67.

⁴³ Cf. 5.1.1.2, 160-161.

built as a ladder implying higher and lower roles and positions. Having in mind the hierarchical thrust of the Roman Catholic system, which has been significantly mitigated after the Second Vatican Council but not entirely reformulated according to a wholly different orientation, it is not surprising to find it reflected in the Roman Catholic concept of mediation, with special reference to the paramount role of the Church in mediating grace to nature. In this respect, the mediating agency of the Church has a hierarchical structure” (LG 18-29) whereby a fundamental distinction is made between the priestly order and the laity. Within the priestly order, in turn, the hierarchical structure is reflected in the differentiation between “the various degrees of participation” (LG 28) in the ministry entrusted by Christ to his apostles and handed on to bishops, priests and deacons, all preceded by the juridical prominence of the Roman Pontiff. The Catholically conceived sacrament of orders is made possible theologically by the hierarchical understanding of the mediation of the Church and is a function of it.

Considering the importance of the Church in the Roman Catholic system and in order to grasp its strategic role as mediating agent, an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism cannot fail to address the ecclesiological issue as the other constitutive element of the make-up of the system. Of course, the attempt will not be aimed at providing a critical overview of Roman Catholic ecclesiology in its historical development, dogmatic structure and present-day emphases. Its goal will be rather to account for the centrality of the Church for the system and within the system, a centrality which is chiefly worked out in terms of Christological analogy and sacramental presence within the framework of a hierarchically understood law of incarnation. In the comprehensive and extremely nuanced universe of Roman Catholic ecclesiology,⁴⁴ these two themes spell out best the ecclesial enactment of the law of incarnation and therefore are essential to appreciate the systemic place and role of the Church. If the nature-grace motif provides the theological framework of the system, the Christological analogy and the sacramental presence of the Church

⁴⁴ Among the many concise treatments of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, Mondin (1986) is a classical reference textbook while Scheffczyk (1998) is a traditional exposition of the Vatican II ecclesiology critical of more progressive interpretations of the Council. Dulles (1988²) sketches out the catholicity of Roman Catholic ecclesiology by pointing to the different “models” used to grasp its mystery. An account of the history of ecclesiology, including Eastern Orthodox and Protestant contributions, is Jay (1977-1978).

are the ecclesiological pillars which sustain the view of the Church as the mediating agent of God's dealings with the world.

6.1.2.2 The Christological Analogy of the Mediation of the Church

As has been argued earlier, the nature-grace motif requires the agency of a mediating subject which would act as a bridge between the two spheres so that the whole of nature might be enveloped by grace by means of an incarnate form of grace. According to the pattern envisaged by the law of incarnation, grace must embody natural vestiges in order to encounter the aspirations of nature. Of all instances in which the law of incarnation has applied, the incarnation of the Son of God is its climax: whereby divine nature takes on human nature in the person Jesus Christ, the God-man. In this respect, the Chalcedonian definition is an attempt to grasp the Christological mystery of the incarnation in terms of the language of two natures in one person. At this point, it is necessary to explore the way in which the Roman Catholic tradition has elaborated its ecclesiological consciousness and self-understanding in terms of the Church as the continuation of the incarnation of the Son of God. The Chalcedonian picture of Jesus Christ has become the theological pattern for elucidating the profound essence of the Church so that the Christological categories are transplanted to the ecclesiological field and used to speak of the Church as the agent which comes from Christ, with Christ and after Christ. Historically, the crucial theme of the Church as the continuation of the incarnation was particularly emphasised by the XIX century Tübingen theologian Johann Adam Möhler who formulated the often quoted definition which summarises the doctrine in its standard terms. According to Möhler, "the visible Church, ..., is the Son of God himself, everlastingly manifesting himself among men in a human form, perpetually renovated, and eternally young – the permanent incarnation of the same, as in Holy Writ, even the faithful are called the body of Christ".⁴⁵ Against the background of the nature-grace motif with its insistence on the visible, human form that grace must take, the Church is seen as the same person of as the Son of God who continues and renews the unique event of the incarnation, being in herself the *locus* where the continuation of the incarnation takes place and where the mission underlying the incarnation is made present in an on-going way.

⁴⁵ Möhler, *Symbolism*, 259. An in-depth study on Möhler's ecclesiology is Himes (1997).

Though mostly associated with Möhler's apologetical writings concerning the unity of the Church and his comparisons between Roman Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies emerging from authoritative symbolic pronouncements, the concept of the Church as the prolongation of the incarnation is well attested in preceding Catholic theology⁴⁶ and has become a standard definition in subsequent ecclesiological reflection.⁴⁷ Building on the same foundation, but also developing the Christological theme with significant theological qualifications and refinements, important magisterial documents (i.e. the 1943 encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi*) and the Vatican II conciliar teaching (e.g. LG 8) have corroborated the already well-established tradition whereby, in Guardini's terms, the Church in "its core is Christ".⁴⁸ In a similar vein, but with a different emphasis on historical presence rather than divine-human substance and on the Word of God rather than the person of Jesus Christ, Karl Rahner has argued that "essentially the Church is the historically continuing presence in the world of the incarnate Word of God".⁴⁹ The interlocking between Christology and ecclesiology is so strongly established in the Roman Catholic ecclesiological consciousness that, according to Ratzinger, a basic step in seeking to understand it is "the Christological definition of the concept of the Church".⁵⁰ While accounting for the centrality of incarnational ecclesiology for the Roman Catholic system, it should be readily acknowledged that the definition provided by Möhler is not a final, *ex-cathedra* pronouncement, as if it contained the full, balanced and definitive Roman Catholic dogmatic statement concerning the Christologically denoted doctrine of the Church. In its historical context, it is rather a clearly stated assertion of an ecclesiological theme centred on the incarnational continuity between Christ and the Church which is certainly fundamental for the Roman Catholic tradition as a whole, even though, like any other doctrinal statement, it is subject to the dynamic of theological development.

In this respect, the theme so laboured by Möhler regarding the relationship between the incarnation of Jesus and the self-understanding of the Church as the

⁴⁶ Congar (1963) 70, n. 1 mentions Thomas Aquinas, Francis of Sales, Bossuet and Fénelon as theologians who had accepted and held it.

⁴⁷ In this respect, Congar (*ibidem*), n. 2 refers to Perrone, Passaglia, Franzelin, Scheeben, d'Herbigny, Sertillanges and Feckes, though he acknowledges that the list could be further expanded. Moreover, Scheffczyk (1998) 50 refers to Berlage, Ernst, and Thalhöfer.

⁴⁸ R. Guardini, *Die Kirche des Herrn*, p. 41 quoted by Ratzinger (1988) 4.

⁴⁹ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 317.

prolongation of that incarnation has undergone criticism by Catholic theologians. Although they appreciate the historical and intellectual context of the work of the Tübingen theologian, with its strong opposition to protestant and deistic tendencies as well as by its reaction to an overstated juridical emphasis on the Church as *societas perfecta* within Roman Catholicism, they have nonetheless questioned the strictly essentialist terms of the definition and the pneumatological lacuna in envisaging the nature of the Church.⁵¹ In the light of the on-going ecclesiological development which is a feature of the catholicity of the system, it is not surprising that Vatican II, while substantially restating the inherent incarnational link between Christ and the Church, has relaxed the quasi identification between the incarnation of the Son of God and its ecclesial prolongation, and redefined it in terms of an “excellent analogy” (“ob non mediocrem analogiam incarnati Verbi misterio assimilatur”, LG 8) while preferring to emphasise the image of the Church in terms of a “sacrament” which perhaps describes more accurately the mystery of the Church and sets it in a more explicit trinitarian context. In spite of secondary diversities in terms of theological language and ecclesiological nuances, the strong incarnational understanding of the nature of the Church belongs to the very core of the way in which the Roman Catholic Church envisages her self-identity. At this point, some key-elements of the analogy need to be explored in more detail in order to introduce the main arguments of the systemic evaluation carried out from an Evangelical theological perspective.

6.1.2.2.1 The Theandric Constitution of the Church

As the Church is the prolongation of the incarnation, its essential constitution mirrors in significant ways that of the Incarnate Son of God. As Jesus of Nazareth is both God and man in the person of Christ according to the language used by the Chalcedonian definition, in an analogous way the Church is made up of divine and human elements which are combined in the theandric institution of the Church itself. The Church is deemed to be co-essentially divine and human, the two aspects being intertwined and inseparable in such a way that the human aspect carries the divine and the divine aspect is embodied in human forms. In stressing the dual nature of the Church against the background of the nature-grace motif, De Lubac argues that the

⁵⁰ Ratzinger (1988) 4.

⁵¹ This is the main thrust of the critique by Mühlen (1968), especially 8-11.

Church shows “a mixture of the divine and human within the visible alone”,⁵² while Vatican II, thinking of the human and divine aspects of the Church, teaches that “they form one interlocked reality which is comprised of a divine and human element” (LG 8). In the light of its theandric constitution, the human dimension of the Church cannot be played against the divine one just as the human nature of Jesus Christ cannot be seen as detracting from his divine nature. More broadly, because the Church is a divine-human reality, its human, sociological and historical characteristics (e.g. visibility, institutions, structures) are always to be related to its divine nature. Referring to the impossible dichotomization of the elements which are always co-inherently present in the Church, George Tavard has spoken very significantly of the Church as “a sociological incarnation of the Body of Christ”,⁵³ thus bringing together the sociological dimension and the incarnational motif against the background of the metaphor of the body which will be dealt with later.⁵⁴ In the Roman Catholic perspective, there is no contradiction between seeing the Church as community (*Gemeinschaft*) and as society (*Gesellschaft*): indeed, the communal aspect cannot be realised apart from the societal one, and vice versa.⁵⁵

The analogy with the orthodox Christological doctrine goes as far as contemplating the same possible heretical dangers if the divine and human aspects are not fully appreciated in shaping the basic contours of the Church according to the Christological pattern. Just as orthodox Christological reflection had to fight both against Nestorian and Monophysitic tendencies which denied the mystery of the incarnation in opposite but symmetrical ways, so a Roman Catholic understanding of the Church has to be safeguarded from the same ancient deviations which would alter what it is essential to uphold. Thinking of the distinct nature of the Church and the risks of misconceiving it, De Lubac contends that “the union between the human and the divine is a very subtle one”, one which needs to be dealt with extreme theological caution and balance. In the ecclesiological field, therefore, downplaying the divine element would mean running the risk of endorsing a somewhat Nestorian view of the Church, whereas underestimating the human element would mean embracing a kind

⁵² De Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church* (1956) 58. The whole of chapter III is significantly entitled “The Two Aspects of the Church” and deals at length with the divinity and humanity of the Church.

⁵³ George Tavard, “Sens de l’Unité”, *La Croix* (1952), quoted by De Lubac (1956) 69.

⁵⁴ Cf. 6.1.2.2.2, 229-231.

⁵⁵ As remembered by De Lubac (1956) 75 quoting Yves de Montcheuil.

of Monophysitic version of ecclesiology. The distortions of both Nestorian and Monophysitic heresies applied to ecclesiology are avoidable only if the Chalcedonian paradox is also maintained as far as the essential shape of the Roman Catholic view of the Church is concerned. In the light of an ecclesiological profile like the Roman Catholic one grounded on the theandric constitution of the Church, it is not surprising that all protestant attempts to articulate an ecclesiology based on the “solism” of the Reformation sound like backward steps which are in danger of resurrecting the Nestorian heresy and applying it to Christian ecclesiology.

Having sketched out the basic elements envisaged in the theandric constitution of the Church, a brief comment is needed in order to account for the Roman Catholic nuanced understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church. In this respect, Roman Catholic theology, especially in its Twentieth century outlook, has been well aware of the potential dangers that an unqualified and vague identification between the incarnation of the Son of the God and the ecclesial continuation of the incarnation could lead to. If Protestant ecclesiology is always in danger of falling into Nestorian traps by dissolving the visible, institutional profile of the Church, the incarnational ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church may run the risk of not upholding the Christological paradox applied to ecclesiology by deifying the Church and therefore lapsing into a kind of ecclesiological Monophysitism. In fact, Möhler’s definition in its essentialist terms and the strong incarnational continuity he advocated could be interpreted as representing this kind of potential ecclesiological deformation. The cautious teaching of Vatican II stressing the relationship between Christ and the Church in terms of “analogy” (LG 8) is an indication of the magisterial awareness of the problem and its willingness to provide a theological category which is better suited to exegeting the incarnational view of the Church in a Roman Catholic way. Apart from being grounded in the classic Thomist tradition, the analogical pattern maintains the nexus between the incarnation and its prolongation while suggesting a safer way of arguing it theologically than the apparent identification which Möhler’s statement may point to. According to an analogical understanding of the relationship, the mystery of the Church appears first of all as a distinct mystery (“*unterschiedenes*”), but also

connected (“*verbunden*es”) with the mystery of incarnation.⁵⁶ More precisely, in Mühlen’s terms, it is not the incarnation as such (“*als so*che”) that continues in the Church; however, it is something of Christ himself (“etwas von Christus *selbst*”) that continues to live in her.⁵⁷ The recourse to analogical thinking makes it possible to underline the presence of the God-man Jesus Christ in the Church in which He continues to live so as to give the Church divine and human aspects, rather than the ontological divinity and humanity of the Incarnate One which is shared with the organ which prolongs the incarnation throughout history. In this respect, Dulles underlines that *Lumen Gentium* 8 “draws an analogy of proportionality between the two natures of Christ and the two aspects of the Church. Just as the humanity of Christ serves the divinity, so the visible institution of the Church serves the mystical communion”.⁵⁸

Within an analogical framework, continuities as well discontinuities are envisaged between the two forms of incarnation. Reflecting on the discontinuities between the incarnate Christ and the ecclesial continuation of the incarnation which the analogical pattern makes room for, Congar argues that in the Church “il n’y a pas ‘nature’ divine en toute rigueur de terme: il y a finalité divine, objet de vie divin, donc actes divins par l’objet et la fin et, pour que ces actes soient vitaux, un principe opératoire proportionné, mais qui n’a pas tout l’en-soi d’une ‘nature’ autonome”.⁵⁹ While the Son of God owns divine nature in a proper, ontological, and substantial way, the Church derives her divine elements by participating in the life of Christ which makes him present within the Church and through it. In this way, the theandric constitution of the Church is fully maintained but, at the same time, set in the context of an analogy between the incarnation of the Son of God and its prolongation in the Church, rather than within the framework of a total identity between the two.

⁵⁶ Mühlen (1968) 391 (italics in the text). Here is the full quote: “Das Mysterium der Kirche zeigt sich nämlich allererst als ein von der Inkarnation *unterschiedenes* und zugleich mit ihr eng *verbunden*es Mysterium”.

⁵⁷ Idem, 176 (italics in the text). Later, Mühlen argues that there is a structural difference between the mystery of the incarnation and that of the Church (188). The difference lays in the fact that the former is a mystery of “filiation” (“Sohnschaft”), the latter of “spiration” (“Geisthauchung”) (194-196).

⁵⁸ Dulles (2000) 120, n. 12.

⁵⁹ Congar (1963) 87. The thrust of the whole essay is to show how the analogical pattern suggested by LG 8 may shed light on the relationship between Christ and the Church and how an unqualified identification between Christ and the Church in terms of the incarnation is theologically unwarranted. Other comments on the continuity/discontinuity are contained in Küng (1968) 234-241.

The Church is a divine-human reality, analogous to the incarnate God-man, which stands at the centre of the Roman Catholic system as its mediating agent. As Jesus Christ mediated the presence and the gifts of God, so the Church mediates the presence and the gifts of God to the world in that it is the theandric agent which continues the presence of God mediated by Jesus Christ. The system makes it impossible to dichotomise or to dissociate what is instead constitutively to be taken together with regard to the church. Attempting to grasp the Roman Catholic relationship between Christ and the Church is essential to define a systemic interpretation of it.

6.1.2.2.2 *The Mystical Body*

The Roman Catholic incarnational definition of the Church powerfully defended in Möhler's writings has been a source of theological inspiration and the basis for further reflection in Roman Catholic ecclesiology. The Vatican II specification that it has to be expounded in analogical terms is just one element which has emerged from it. Another very important development of the theme has to do with the rich and fascinating tradition concerning the appreciation of the Church as the mystical body of Christ. At the magisterial level, the 1943 encyclical *Mystici corporis Christi*, later quoted by Vatican II (LG 7), is simply the climax of a gradual re-discovery and deepening of the theme rekindled in Nineteenth century, even though it has a considerable patristic echo. In this respect, Subilia has evoked the Augustinian conception of the *totus Christus*, resulting from the union between Christ and the Church which perfects both head and members.⁶⁰ The theology of the Church as *Corpus Christi Mysticum* is well attested in the history of Roman Catholic ecclesiology and, according to De Lubac, it is "the key point of theological reflexion on the Church of Christ".⁶¹ If the Christological analogy deriving from the incarnation expresses the nature of the Church as a divine-human reality, the ecclesiology of the mystical body shows the indivisible unity of Christ and the

⁶⁰ Subilia (1962) 143-151. The idea that Christ is somehow ("quodammodo") perfected in the Church is advocated by *Mystici corporis* ("Ecclesia veluti plenitudo constituatur et complementum Redemptoris, Christus vero quoad omnia in Ecclesia quodammodo adimpleatur", DS, 3813). The Augustinian theme of the *Christus totus* is recalled in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (§ 795).

⁶¹ De Lubac (1956) 67. For a brief historical sketch of the doctrine, cf. De Lubac (1956) 61-67. Later (p. 86), De Lubac quotes Louis Bouyer writing that the metaphor

Church which can be seen in the ecclesiological use of the Pauline metaphor of the body coupled with the reference to the *mysterium* which inhabits the Church itself. The quasi ontological categories of the analogy are enriched by the organicist categories of the metaphor, so that, through the *et-et* theological epistemology of the system which enabled it to stretch its horizons, Roman Catholic ecclesiology can expand its contours in order to include different sets of ecclesiological pictures and languages into its comprehensive view of the Church. The compenetration of the two perspectives is well attested in *Mystici corporis* when, within the context of the exposition of the ecclesiology of the mystical body, it is stated that the Church exists as if it were “almost a second person of Christ” (“quasi altera Christi persona”).⁶² Here again, the ecclesiological appreciation concerning the mystical body is based on the reiteration of the Christological emphasis related to the Church as the continuation of the incarnation, even though the “quasi” of the encyclical moderates the terms of the identification and paves the way for the subsequent specification by Vatican II that it is an analogical identification.

The core of the metaphor refers to the indissoluble, organic bond between head (i.e. Christ) and members (i.e. the Church) within the unity of a single body so that what can be ascribed to the head can also be attributed in some measure to the members. In this respect, the 1896 encyclical *Satis cognitum* by Leo XIII refers to the unity in the vivid terms of “complexio copulatioque”,⁶³ pointing out the profound relationship which the two parts enjoy as if it could be compared to sexual intercourse in the context of a bond of love. The Church is therefore organically related to, and pervasively inhabited by Christ and also subordinated to him in that both the Church and Christ are differently located, yet inseparable parts of the same body. While the members are dependent on the head in the sense that they receive from it direction and serve its cause, they are also so inextricably united to it as to form a single body so that the head cannot operate apart from its members and cannot be separated from them. The fact that the metaphor of the body is closely linked to the theandric constitution of the Church is spelt out by von Balthasar who argues that “the Church is not merely metaphorically the body of Christ, but by the power of the Eucharist it is that part of mankind that he has joined to his personal

of the mystical body is a “particularly valuable analogical image to lead us towards a proper intellectual grasp of the Church’s nature”.

⁶² *DS*, 3806.

⁶³ *DS*, 3301.

body in such a way that he lives in the Church as the soul lives in the body'.⁶⁴ Apart from the reference to the Eucharist which has not been touched on so far, the thrust of von Balthasar's statement is that Christ lives in his body and is his body in a way that a reductionist interpretation of the metaphor of the body would fail to understand properly. The organic bond and the ontological analogy are therefore intertwined in the reality of the Church to the point of being mutually illuminating in understanding the mystery of the Church. These brief comments do not exhaust the theological richness of the Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the mystical body but are nonetheless useful in explaining why it is impossible for the Roman Catholic system to think of Christ in isolation from the Church and vice versa, and therefore the utter theological implausibility, in Roman Catholic eyes, of the Protestant cry "solus Christus" if it implies a potential breach of the organic bond that unites Christ and the Church whose historical institutions cannot be severed from its spiritual life. The Roman Catholic ecclesiology of the mystical body significantly serves to reinforce the centrality of the Church as the mediating agent of the system.

6.1.2.2.3 The Christologically Based Threefold Office of the Church

The central position held by the Church within the Roman Catholic system is strongly argued on Christological grounds. Both the doctrines of the Church as the extension of the incarnation and that of the mystical body converge in presenting the Church as the divine-human institution in analogy to the divine and human natures of the incarnate Son of God, an institution which unites the members of a mystical body which enjoys an organic bond with the head who is Christ. Though constitutive^{to} the Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the Christological theme is also corroborated by a renewed pneumatological awareness which consolidates it while helping to solve its ambiguities. In fact, recent developments in Roman Catholic ecclesiology have seen a significant theological re-appreciation of the essential role of the Holy Spirit in determining the nature and mission of the Church.⁶⁵ The result of this on-going process is that the dangers of ecclesiological reductionism which may have affected the tradition identifiable with Möhler's incarnational motif have been faced with the

⁶⁴ Von Balthasar (1987) 92.

⁶⁵ Mühlen (1967) is just an example of the way in which a pneumatological concern can have a bearing on the shaping of a Christologically denoted ecclesiology. For a more general survey on the pneumatological emphasis in Roman Catholic present-day ecclesiological reflection, cf. Mondin (1986) 353-367.

early Twentieth century emphasis on the Church as the mystical body and, even more efficaciously, with the present-day reflection on the fundamental relationship between Christology, pneumatology and ecclesiology. Against this background, it is not surprising to read the attempt to reshape the incarnational analogy between Christ and the Church in terms of the gift of the Spirit of Christ to the Church. More precisely and in Sesboüé's neat wording, "l'Église n'est pas la continuation de l'existence de Jésus, elle est le fruit du don de l'Esprit de Jésus".⁶⁶ In an attempt to provide a concise yet comprehensive statement reflecting the theological richness of the interlocking between Christ, the Spirit, and the Church against the background of a pneumatologically aware incarnational analogy which stresses the metaphor of the Church as the body of Christ, Dulles argues that "Christ ... perpetuates his presence in his Body through the indwelling Spirit".⁶⁷

Even in the ecclesiological domain, then, the Roman Catholic system expresses much of its inner dynamism within the context of its multifaceted unity and according to its *et-et* regulative principle.⁶⁸

Apart from evoking some of the major themes which are quintessential for the self-identity of the Roman Catholic Church, the purpose of this section is to explore the main consequences of the Christological grounding of the Church for the operations of the system with special reference to its mediating agent. The Roman Catholic Church stands at the centre of the system because her Christologically based identity demands its prominent position and role in virtue of the special relationship which she enjoys with regard to Christ and the way such a relationship is accounted for theologically. Because the Church is what it is in relation to Christ, she shares his prerogatives and exercises them on his behalf. By prolonging His incarnation and deriving her theandric constitution from Him, the Church continues to carry out the salvific project pursued by the Incarnate One while partaking in his power and offices. In the post-ascension era, when the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ has come to an end, the ministry of the resurrected Christ is continued by the agency of the Church which represents him and acts on his behalf. In this respect, Rahner argues that the Church is "the continuation, the perpetual presence of the task and function

⁶⁶ Sesboüé (1999) 439.

⁶⁷ Dulles (2000) 102.

⁶⁸ On the Roman Catholic regulative principle, cf. 5.3.4, 178-179.

of Christ in the economy of redemption, his contemporaneous presence in history, his life, the Church in the full and proper sense".⁶⁹

The theological issue at stake is the transposition of the *triplex munus* of Jesus Christ to the Church with the consequential participation of the Church in Christ's prerogatives as king, prophet and priest according to the hierarchical structure of the Church herself. The understanding of the work of Christ in terms of the *triplex munus* has been a major pattern followed especially, but not exclusively, within the Reformed tradition in order to come to terms with the manifold aspects of the offices of Christ: the kingly office primarily refers to his dominion over the world, his prophetic office is exerted in his authoritative revelation of the will of the Father, and the priestly office relates mainly to the atonement He has accomplished in order to reconcile the world to the Father.⁷⁰ Against the theological background of the triple office of Christ and its bearing on delineation of the role of the Church, it is worth considering the way in which the office of the Church is envisaged and advocated within the Roman Catholic system in terms of the transposition of the prerogatives of Christ to the Church, his mystical body prolonging the incarnation in an analogical way. According to the language of *Mystici corporis*, it is Christ "the divine Redeemer" who "per Ecclesiam baptizat, docet, regit, solvit, ligat, offert, sacrificat".⁷¹ In spite of the sober form in which it is presented, the theology implied in this bold assertion is outstandingly significant: the offices of Christ whereby He enacts his threefold mission to the world are delegated to the Church which acts in His name, deriving its authority and the scope of its ministry from the Incarnate One who continues to be present in and through the Church. In order to elucidate the threefold transposition, several other specific comments on the outworking of the Christological-ecclesiological nexus via the incarnational analogy are required at this point.

⁶⁹ Rahner (1963) 13.

⁷⁰ For a standard conservative Reformed treatment of the *triplex munus* of Christ, cf. Berkhof (1958) 356-412. According to Subilia (1962) 157, n. 349, it is curious that in the history of dogma this doctrine was elaborated systematically by John Calvin. The curiosity derives from the fact that a typically Reformed doctrinal construction has become the standard theological background for the Roman Catholic defence of the kingly, prophetic and priestly offices of the Church. Subilia works out his overall interpretation and critique of Roman Catholicism in terms of the *triplex munus* of Roman Church (1962) 152-221.

⁷¹ DS, 3806.

Firstly, as Christ is king, so the Church exercises his *imperium* on his behalf through its hierarchically ordained structures. In this respect, the ecclesiology of power, authority, government, jurisdiction is a highly developed feature of the Roman Catholic Church, which echoes the traditional juridical concept of the medieval Church as *societas perfecta* but which has a deeper root than merely historical antecedents in that it is nourished by the Christological analogy (e.g. LG 27; 36). The institutional structure is a function of its *potestas gubernandi*. Secondly, as Christ is prophet, so the Church joins in his prophetic office (LG 12) especially by way of its *magisterium*. The Word of God is preserved, explained, and made known by the Church (DV 9) whose teaching office is entrusted with the task of “authentically interpreting the word of God” (DV 10). The finality of sacred Scripture is recognised, though the Roman Catholic concept of the word of God is wider and includes the handed on “sacred tradition” which is thought to flow from the same divine wellspring (DV 9). In virtue of its prophetic office, the Church is therefore *ecclesia magistra*. Finally, as Christ is priest, so the Church continues his priestly office by way of its *ministerium*, which is carried out above all in the administration of the sacraments (LG 10-11). The Church stands between Christ and the world, representing the sanctifying grace of God in Christ to the world and acting as a consecrated humanity which channels divine grace to the whole world. The exercise of the *triplex munus* is thought of as if it were entrusted to the whole Church, even though the hierarchical thrust of Roman Catholic ecclesiology makes a fundamental distinction between the role of the priestly order and the laity in discharging it.

Beside evoking these pivotal themes for the Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-consciousness, it is important to underline once again the main purpose of the section. In fact, the theological rationale provided by the concept of the Church as the prolongation of the incarnation in the context of the indissoluble union between Christ and the Church sanctioned by the doctrine of the mystical body is the basis on which the Roman Catholic system argues for the mediating agency of the Church whose centrality for the system is utterly fundamental. The incarnational analogy maintained by Roman Catholicism requires and warrants a Christologically derived agency which is indefectibly associated with Christ, and carries out His mediating offices by prolonging His presence and action in the world. In turn, the distinctively Roman Catholic articulation of the incarnational analogy which is vitally important

for the self-understanding of the identity of the Roman Church stems from the previously sketched out version of the nature-grace motif which is the theological horizon of the Roman Catholic system.

6.1.2.3 The Sacramentality of the Mediation of the Church

As has been suggested earlier, the Christological justification for Roman Catholic ecclesiology has undergone theological development in the Twentieth century in two main areas. On the one hand, contemporary reflection has tried to guard the incarnational analogy between Christ and the Church from possible ambiguities and misconceptions which could lead to forms of ecclesiological Monophysitism. On the other hand, there have been important contributions which have proposed an integration of the ecclesiological theme associated with the Möhler tradition by using the metaphor of the mystical body and underlining the importance of the person and role of the Holy Spirit in constituting the Church. Both the mystical and pneumatological dimensions are ecclesiological emphases which have further enriched the Roman Catholic Church's self-identity which is already very well developed.

In spite of all the theological renewal which they have brought, there is yet another fundamental input in the contemporary development of Roman Catholic ecclesiology which is worth referring to in order to understand the theology supporting the view of the Church as the mediating agent of the Roman Catholic system. In this respect, it is significant that the major ecclesiological document of the Second Vatican Council, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*, in its very first paragraph, introduces the connotation of the Church as a "sacrament" (LG 1). This connotation was to become one of the main ecclesiological achievements of the whole Council (e.g. LG 9, 48; SC 26; AG 5; GS 42) and a rich source of inspiration for subsequent ecclesiological elaboration within Roman Catholic theological circles.

The importance of the Vatican II in general and of *Lumen Gentium* in particular is that while, on the one hand, they indicated the epistemological pattern for coming to terms adequately with the incarnational motif of the Church (i.e. "analogy"), on the other, they brought about a slight shift of emphasis in her ecclesiological self-awareness by indicating that the category of "sacrament" was paramount in dealing with the profoundly mysterious, yet vitally important

relationship between Christ and the Church. In so doing, *Lumen Gentium* was guided by the inner dynamic of the system which, as far as the developmental framework of Roman Catholic theology is concerned, consists in restating the thrust of a traditional doctrine and suggesting a further expansion of the theological horizon by revising past hermeneutical approaches to the same doctrine or indicating potentially fruitful perspectives which would shed new light on the traditional theological heritage. The outcome of a procedure such as the one used by Vatican II is that the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church as the prolongation of the incarnation has been further reinforced. At the same time and as a consequence of the *aggiornamento* of the Council, the theological understanding of what it means for the Church to be the prolongation of the incarnation has been set in the context of an analogical pattern. This, in turn, is confirmed by the insistence on the sacramentality of the Church. The theme of the Church as a sacrament is another way of exegeting the Christological thrust of the traditional definition of the Church as the continuation of the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

6.1.2.3.1 The Christological Roots of Sacramentality

The emphasis on the sacramentality of the Church is not an abrupt ecclesiological innovation but a further development of the Christological grounding of the Roman Catholic ecclesial self-awareness which is strongly supported by the same paragraph which introduces the analogical correspondence between Church and sacrament in *Lumen Gentium*. In fact, the conciliar text forcefully argues that the Church is a kind of sacrament “by her relationship with Christ” (1), pointing, therefore, to the interaction between Christology and ecclesiology from which the sacramentality of the Church emerges. Later in the Constitution, the Council confirms once again the Christological background of the notion of sacramentality by asserting that the risen and Spirit-giving Christ “through the Spirit has established His body, the Church, as the universal sacrament of salvation” (28). The evidence makes it clear that the theological domain of the sacramentality of the Church fully presupposes the traditional incarnational motif, and, even more than that, is a re-elaboration of its significance using the extremely fertile category of sacrament. Evidently, Vatican II preferred to invest in this ecclesiological configuration which has the advantage of enlarging the spectrum of ecclesiological analogies useful for grasping the mystery of the Church seen from a Roman Catholic perspective while not abandoning the

incarnational pattern which continues to play a prominent role. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* testifies to the growing importance of the image of the Church as sacrament in presenting it (§§ 774-776) before going on to explain the meaning of the Church as the body of Christ (§§ 787-796).⁷²

The reference to the sacramental ecclesiology promoted by the Council has also stimulated contemporary and subsequent theological reflection which has tried to elucidate the paramount relationship between Christ and the Church in terms of sacramental theology and language. In so doing, present-day theological investigations have attempted to explore new ways of understanding the analogy between the incarnation of the Son of God and its prolongation within the life of the Church. Henri De Lubac, for example, has argued that while Christ is “the sacrament of God”, the Church is “the sacrament of Christ”. There is an analogy between the Church as the sacrament of Christ and the Son as the sacrament of the Father.⁷³ The theological argument which girds the comparison suggested by De Lubac seems to affirm that as Christ reveals the Father and accomplishes his mission, so the Church does the same with regard to Christ and his office. The hermeneutical tools for approaching the incarnational motif are different but the theological substance remains basically the same: the fact that the Church is the sacrament of Christ just as He is the sacrament of the Father is another way of arguing for the theandric constitution of the Church and her the threefold office inherited by Christ.

More recently, Karl Rahner has developed the theme of the Church as “primal sacrament” (*Ursakrament*) by linking it to the abiding presence of Christ in her. According to Rahner, “Christ is the primal sacramental word of God, uttered in the one history of mankind, in which God made known his irrevocable mercy”.⁷⁴ The person and the work of Christ can be thought of in terms of sacrament, but bearing in mind that “Christ in his historical existence is both reality and sign, *sacramentum* and *res sacramenti*, of the redemptive grace of God”.⁷⁵ Against the background of Christ being the primal sacramental word, Rahner further argues that the Church is

⁷² It should be noticed, however, that, even before sketching the view of the Church as sacrament, the *Catechism* deals with the institution of the Church by Christ Jesus (§§ 763-766) and the theandric nature of the Church (§ 771) in such a way that the presentation of the Church as sacrament is framed within a Christological context before the incarnational motif is examined more specifically.

⁷³ De Lubac, *The Splendour of the Church*, pp. 147-173.

⁷⁴ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (1963) 18.

⁷⁵ *Idem*, 15.

Ursakrament in that she is “the continuance, the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God’s salvific will. The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace”.⁷⁶ Here even more explicitly than in De Lubac, the sacramental understanding of the Church is evoked by referring to the newly adopted sacramental language but it is also explained in terms of the vocabulary inherited from the incarnational pattern (e.g. “continuance”, “presence”). Moreover, Rahner explicitly advocates the derivation from Christ of the “intrinsically sacramental structure” of the Church to the point that what it means for the Church to be sacrament depends on her being “the body and bride of Christ who abides in the Church”.⁷⁷

Another example of the way in which the sacramentality of the Church is argued for in Christological terms against the background of an incarnational pattern enriched by a pneumatological stress is provided by Avery Dulles when dealing with the theological cause of the efficacy of the sacraments. In this respect, according to Dulles, the sacraments “owe their efficacy to the continued presence of Christ who remains with the Church, working through the Holy Spirit”.⁷⁸ Here again, the sacramental activity of the Church which is worked out by means of the specific sacraments is presented in terms of the incarnational language of the “continued presence” of Christ within the Church. In other words, the sacraments of the Church which manifest her intrinsic sacramental nature are rooted in the reality of the Church which is the organ in which Christ prolongs his presence and ministry in the world.

Clearly, the evidence provided by some authoritative theologians who have reflected on the sacramentality of the Church as a central ecclesiological theme in order to grasp her mystery indicates a significant continuity between the incarnational and sacramental models of the Church in that both strongly advocate the pervasive presence of Christ in the Church. The two perspectives intertwine and

⁷⁶ Idem, 18. If Rahner speaks of the Church in these terms (i.e. first sacrament), Dulles (1988²), 64, recalls that the German theologian Otto Semmelroth wrote a book entitled *The Church as Primordial Sacrament* and that many representative and authoritative theologians (e.g. Schillebeeckx, Smulders, Congar, Groot, Martelet) have developed similar themes and definitions.

⁷⁷ Rahner (1963) 18.

form a typically Roman Catholic development of the traditional ecclesiological theme worked out in Christological terms.

6.1.2.3.2 *The Sacramentality of the Church in Terms of Sign and Instrument*

Apart from indicating the Christological background of the sacramental profile of Roman Catholic perception of the nature of the Church, it is important to appreciate the theological significance of this ecclesiological model which is centred on the notion of sacrament. In this respect, the Second Vatican Council, while not elaborating a detailed theological definition of the Church as sacrament, has nonetheless given some indications of the broad semantic field of the term as applied to the Church. More precisely, *Lumen Gentium* specifies that the Church is “sacrament” in terms of her being a “sign of intimate union with God and of the unity of mankind” as well as in terms of her being “an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity” (1). While the theological contours of the word “sacrament” remain extremely fluid and ultimately open-ended, the notions of “sign” and “instrument” are the main pointers which, according to Vatican II, help to delineate the ecclesiological connotation of the being of the Church as sacrament. The Church is a sacrament in that she is a twofold sign of a given reality and an active instrument in its realisation. If the Council of Trent insisted on the definition of sacrament in terms of a symbol as “rei sacrae et invisibilis gratiae formam visibilem”,⁷⁸ the Second Vatican Council widens its scope by employing the categories of sign and instrument in order to elucidate it further. In doing so, it restates the representative nature of the sacrament but it also reinforces the awareness that the sacrament also has an operative function in actually bringing about the reality which it signifies.

Firstly, the sacramental nature of the Church is related to the fact that she signifies the organic bond with God which she enjoys because she is the body of Christ. The “intimate union with God” is the reality she is a unique sign of and this reality is only possible and plausible because of Christ’s inhabitation in her by His Spirit. The Christological-ecclesiological nexus, which has already been examined, is here stressed again in terms of the “union” between Christ and the Church, which is

⁷⁸ Dulles (2000) 111. Dulles makes this comment in the context of a comparison between Roman Catholic and Evangelical responses to BEM which revolve around the theological and ecclesiological significance of the sacraments.

⁷⁹ The definition is taken from the 1555 *Decretum de ss. Eucharistia*, DS 1639.

extended to the whole of the Triune God to whom the Church is united. In fact, *Lumen Gentium* says that the union is between the Church and God. The other vital aspect which Vatican II underlines in providing an introductory definition of the Church as sacrament is that the Church is a sign of unity of the whole of mankind. On the one hand, she is the sign of a divine-human unity supremely enacted in the incarnation of the Son of God but also truly prolonged in the life of the Church herself; on the other hand, the Church recapitulates the unity between humans which she guards and promotes, desiring and working for its progressive, *de facto* extension until it arrives at its *de iure* destination. The reference to the “unity of mankind” which is what the Church signifies recalls what has been argued about the catholicity of the Church as the programmatic horizon of the Roman Catholic system.⁸⁰ The Church is both representative of the union with God and the unity of mankind. She is upwardly oriented in her special relationship to God, as well as being horizontally oriented because she embodies the unity of mankind. The sacramental significance of the Church in terms of her being a twofold “sign” underlines the centrality of the Church in her unique nature. On the basis of her unity with God, she strives to work for the unity of mankind, thus showing herself to be what Kuyper called the “middle link” between God and the world.⁸¹

Secondly, the sacramental nature of the Church is defined by Vatican II in terms of her operative instrumentality in achieving the unity of mankind of which she is a sign. If the “sign” speaks of her nature in particular, the instrument she is primarily specifies her role. In being what she is and doing what she does, the Church also contributes to the realisation of her paramount goal, that is, the eschatological return of humanity to its original and already given unity. As Avery Dulles has pointed out, in the sacramental acts which the Church performs and which are a function of her being a sacrament, “the Church signifies what it contains and contains what it signifies”.⁸² In other words, there is an intertwined relationship between her nature as sign and her role as instrument, in such a way that in being what she is, the Church performs her role efficaciously, and in doing what she does, the Church enacts her nature properly. In the perspective of *Lumen Gentium*, “sign”

⁸⁰ Cf. 5.3, 172-181.

⁸¹ Cf. 5.1.1.2, 160-161.

⁸² Dulles (1988²) 70. In this respect, Rahner (1963) 19 reinforces the statement with a set of strong adverbs when he writes that “the Church is always and unchangeably the sign which brings with it always and inseparably what it signifies”.

and “instrument” are therefore the two sides of the same ecclesiological coin which represents the self-attributed value of the Roman Catholic Church.

The theme of the sacramentality of the Church deserves a deeper analysis and a more careful consideration since it is one the main ecclesiological models in post-Vatican II theological reflection.⁸³ The main thrust of this section is rather to establish the point that the recent insistence on the sacramentality of the Church stems from the same ecclesiological presupposition which is attested in the traditional Roman Catholic ecclesiological pattern based on the Christological analogy. It is a development which stands in theological continuity with the view of the Church as an extension of the Incarnation, though it brings another element to the already rich cluster of different ecclesiological images through which the mystery of the Church is approached. For this reason, at the centre of the Evangelical evaluation of the Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-awareness there must be an analysis of the crucial relationship between Christ and the Church as worked out in both the Roman Catholic and Evangelical traditions.

6.1.2.4 The Significance of the Roman Catholic Self-Understanding of the Church for an Evangelical Evaluation of Roman Catholicism as a System

The theological core of the Roman Catholic system has a twofold focus, yet an overall, coherent framework which nurtures its vision, project, and operations. The nature-grace motif, on the one hand, and the self-understanding of the Church in terms of the extension of the incarnation, on the other, are the two interconnected pillars that sustain the system and give it the programmatic thrust which is then embodied in the life and work of the Roman Catholic Church. While an Evangelical evaluation of this twofold core would object to the Roman Catholic articulation of the nature-grace motif in terms of its generous openness to nature, its moderate view of the effects of sin and the synergy between nature and grace which is envisaged within the system,⁸⁴ it would also question the way in which the relationship between Christ and the Church is established and, more generally, the nexus between the Christological background of the law of mediation and its ecclesiological enactment in and through the structures and mission of the Roman Catholic Church. The theological breach observed between the Roman Catholic and the Evangelical

⁸³ For more insights into the sacramentality of the Church, with special reference to the relationship between sacramentality and soteriology, cf. Tillard (1984).

systems is reflected in the differentiation of their respective ecclesiologies. As Charles Hodge argued in his 1878 *Systematic Theology*, “almost all the points of difference between Protestants and Romanists depend on the decision of the question, ‘What is the Church?’”.⁸⁵ The different answers to this apparently simple but deeply searching question fairly indicate the systemic difference between the two traditions because, while touching on the understanding of the Church, it encompasses *in nuce* the whole theological orientation of the two systems which is expressed in the way in which the being of the Church is envisaged. In this respect, it is difficult to think that Hodge’s assertion grossly overstates the case or that it is specifically applicable to the unique historical context of the second half of the XIX century but not extendable to others such as the post-Vatican II scenario. Rather, it underlines with theological fairness and insight the real point at issue between the Roman Catholic and Evangelical frameworks which have at their centres the problem of ecclesiology and all the theological issues related to it. After outlining the main tenets of Roman Catholic ecclesiology and their bearing on the whole of the fabric of its system, it is time to spell out the chief theological concerns that an Evangelical evaluation of the Roman Catholic understanding of the Church would consider as pivotal from a systemic point of view.

6.1.2.4.1 *The Hermeneutic of the Ascension for the Self-Understanding of the Church*

The self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church revolves around the substantial, although not unnuanced, continuity which is established between the incarnation of the Son of God and the extension of that incarnation in the life of the Church. The continuity is argued for in terms of an analogy so that the uniqueness of both realities is somehow safeguarded, but within the framework of an over-arching, universal law of incarnation which governs both concrete manifestations of grace in the realm of nature.⁸⁶ An Evangelical understanding of the relationship between Christ and the Church in terms of the common pattern provided by the law of

⁸⁴ As previously argued in 6.1.1, 195-217.

⁸⁵ Hodge vol. 1 (1960) 135. Against the background of the Evangelical-Catholic dialogue is USA, Neuhaus (1995) 191 has recently stated: "Of the many important differences between Catholics and most evangelicals, I believe the question of the Church must have high priority in our continuing discussion. It is not first of all or most importantly a question of the merits of this church versus that church or some other church. It is a question of *the Church as such*" (italics in the text).

⁸⁶ For the meaning of the expression “law of incarnation”, cf. 6.1.2.1, 218-223.

incarnation would function in a different way from the Roman Catholic one in that it would see a stronger element of discontinuity between the pre-ascension enactment of the law associated with the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ and its post-ascension prolongation within the life of the Church.⁸⁷ In this respect, the difference between the two ecclesiological visions, which have a fundamental role in shaping the basic frameworks of the respective systems, derives from the way in which the ascension is viewed within the economy of the law of incarnation and theologically assessed in its significance for understanding the way in which Jesus Christ is present within the life of the Church. So, the ascension is the Christological *locus* from which the two ecclesiological perspectives depart, developing into two divergent systems.

The theological hermeneutic of the ascension has therefore a systemic value for it decides the paramount questions: what kind of embodiment of the law of incarnation comes to an end with the departing of Jesus Christ from earth and what kind of embodiment of the same law continues in the Church even after His departure?⁸⁸ The Roman Catholic system looks at the ascension within the continuity of the pattern established with the incarnation, even though it recognises the newness of the post-ascension period of the same law. In this respect, the magisterial reference to the language of “analogy” between the incarnation of the Son of God and its ecclesial extension softens the rigid correspondence of the incarnational model and introduces an element of non-linear development between the two, while preserving the overall unitary pattern of the law of incarnation which the Church enacts after the ascension of Jesus Christ. The Evangelical system tends to view the ascension in more abrupt, radical ways in that it conceives it as the coming to an end of the earthly ministry of Jesus Christ which cannot be extended or prolonged in any form because of its uniqueness within the economy of salvation and its once and for all soteriological significance. The demarcation between “before” the ascension and “after” it does not leave enough room to shape an ecclesiology in terms of the

⁸⁷ Generally speaking, the ecclesiological consequences of the ascension are not analysed by Evangelical theologians who, instead, tend to underline its significance within the context of the salvific mission of Jesus Christ. For treatments of the ascension in standard Evangelical systematic theologies, cf. Berkhof (1958³) 350-351; Berkouwer, *The Work of Christ* (1965) 202-222; Grudem (1996) 616-620.

⁸⁸ For an introductory exposition of the biblical data on the ascension, cf. Donne (1983), Toon (1984), Parsons (1987), and Zwiép (1997). The ecclesiological significance of the ascension has been recently underlined by Douglas Farrow (1999) whose study shows, among other things, the crucial importance of the doctrine of the ascension for ecclesiology.

prolongation of the incarnation. Since the meaning it attributes to the ascension is much more marked by an element of discontinuity within the unfolding of God's redemptive plan, it is a problem for Evangelical ecclesiology to speak of the Church using the language of the extension of the incarnation. The same theological uneasiness applies to the analogical re-reading of the incarnational model which has been pursued from the Vatican II onwards and has moderated the incarnational continuity while maintaining its fundamental reality.

The dialectic between Roman Catholic continuity and Evangelical discontinuity in envisaging the relationship between Christ and the Church depicts a systemic difference which has a bearing on every aspect of the respective understandings of what it means for the Church to be the Church.

6.1.2.4.2 The Theological Significance of Being "in" Christ

The theological understanding of the ascension, especially as far as its ecclesiological consequences are concerned, is a strong argument through which Roman Catholicism attributes to the Church the role of embodying the on-going incarnation of the ascended Christ, sharing His kingly, priestly, and prophetic prerogatives, and continuing His salvific mission. On the Roman Catholic interpretation of the significance of the ascension for the identity of the Church, the Evangelical critique points out the overstated continuity which is perceived between Christ and the Church and which is used to argue for the centrality of the Church in the Roman Catholic system. Beside the divergence in working out the ecclesiological aspects of the ascension, there is also another hermeneutical issue which has important consequences for the whole direction of Roman Catholic ecclesiology and, therefore, for the whole orientation of its system. Another important way of arguing for the close relationship between Christ and the Church via the incarnational model for ecclesiology is based on a rather realist reading of the Pauline language of being "in Christ".⁸⁹ The Roman Catholic understanding of the Pauline language of what it means for the Church to be "in" Christ provides a parallel set of arguments in order to establish the incarnational analogy between Christ and the Church as well as the introductory element which helps to guide the interpretation of another foundational Pauline metaphor for Roman Catholic ecclesiology, that is the Church as the "body

⁸⁹ On the significance of this Pauline expression, cf. Ridderbos (1977) 57-64, Ziesler (1990) 49-52, and Dunn (1998) 396-401.

of Christ". The Roman Catholic hermeneutic of the Pauline "in" applied to ecclesiology allows the Roman Catholic system to think of the relationship between Christ and Church in terms of mutual interpenetration to the point of recognising a given, indefectible, organic, incontrovertible unity. If this somewhat ontological interpretation of the preposition "in" is hermeneutically plausible and ecclesiologically extendible, its application to the Roman Catholic Church supports her utter centrality for the post-ascension history of salvation in that the ascended Christ lives "in" the Church, thus extending his incarnation "in" her while the Church is always associated with Christ, and inextricably so. For the Roman Catholic system, the being of the Church "in" Christ has a definitive, not-reversible significance which gives the historic Church the assurance that she will always be "in" Christ as she has always been "in" Him. Whenever Christ is mentioned, then the Church will be found because, being "in" Him, she will be where Christ is. Moreover, whatever Christ does to the world, He will do it through the operations of the Church which is "in" Him and lives "in" Him. Because of the "in", the Roman Catholic Christ is never *solus Christus* as the Reformation was apt to argue, but always *Christus in ecclesia*, or to be more adherent to the Pauline use of the preposition, *ecclesia in Christo*. The theological logic of the Roman Catholic reading of the being of the Church "in" Christ shapes the whole of the ecclesiological self-understanding of the Church and gives her an ontological status which is an inalienable feature of her nature and mission.

The Evangelical reading of the Pauline expression is as realist as the Roman Catholic one, though it would underline the entirely submissive and utterly dependent role of the Church which is "in" Christ and her innermost identity in terms of her being submitted to and dependent on Him. The Evangelical "in" strongly stresses the fact that the Church is "under" Christ while expressing the reality of the Church being engrafted into Christ. Apart from the indication of the specific nuance of the Evangelical interpretation of the "in" which always implies submission and dependence, it would also contemplate both the possibility that a historic form of the Church may distance herself from the intimate closeness of being "in" Christ and, even more than that, the theological possibility of articulating a Christology, a soteriology and an ecclesiology in terms of *solus Christus*. In other words, the Evangelically interpreted "in" is not an ontological guarantee of the presence of Christ in the Church and does not encourage the historically contingent Church to

rely passively on her position of nearness to Christ implied in the “in”. It is also a recognition of the ontological uniqueness and soteriological primacy of Christ which the Church cannot share nor reduplicate. On this ground, the two systems reiterate their systemic particularity in envisaging the being of the Church “in” Christ in significantly different ways.

6.1.2.4.3 The Quest for a Safeguarded Uniqueness

Both the ecclesiological significance of the ascension and the application to the Church of the Pauline expression “in Christ” characterise the Roman Catholic incarnational model in its attempt to come to terms with the nature and mission of the Church, with special reference to the relationship between the incarnate Son of God and the ecclesial extension of the incarnation in the post-ascension history. While the framework of the relationship is analogical, as Vatican II has insisted, the reality of the union is vitally important to delineate the ontological and functional identity of the Church which has therefore a central role within the Roman Catholic system as a consequence of what she is in relationship to Christ. The ecclesiological hermeneutic of the ascension and of the “in Christ” language of Paul has a systemic value in that it warrants the strong self-awareness of the Roman Catholic Church and her fundamental position within the overall outlook of the system. An Evangelical evaluation of the Roman Catholic system cannot fail to recognise these pillars of the system in the interface between Christology and ecclesiology, as well as questioning them in the light of an alternative hermeneutic of the issues involved within the context of a differently understood law of incarnation, which would then result in a more modest ecclesiological profile for the Church and in a more guarded sense of the uniqueness of the person and work of Jesus Christ.

Against the background of the nature-grace motif previously referred to, the incarnational model which prevails in the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church gives rise to a whole cluster of theological convictions and ecclesial practices which, on the one hand, are rather quintessential for Roman Catholicism and, on the other, utterly foreign to Evangelicalism. In all these matters, which will be selectively and briefly touched upon, the difference between the two system stems from the same source, that is a different articulation of the nature-grace motif and a differently shaped ecclesiology in its relation to Christology. In other words, the vast phenomenology of the differences between the Roman Catholic system and the

Evangelical one has a composite, yet inter-connected aetiology which resides in choices at a fundamental level which are part of the very fabric of the respective frameworks of thought.

An indicative example of the combination between the Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-awareness and its view of the relationship between nature and grace has to do with the way in which the mediation of Christ is worked out ecclesologically and also mariologically which is strictly related to the ecclesiological dimension of mediation. In line with the traditional magisterial teaching which stresses the unique mediation of Jesus Christ, Vatican II has restated the same recognition of the uniqueness of His mediatory role in unambiguous terms (e.g. LG 60 and 62). Also in line with the magisterial tradition,⁹⁰ this alleged and clearly expressed uniqueness, however, is not understood according to the Protestant restrictions of the *solus Christus*, but according to the Roman Catholic comprehensiveness and openness of its nature-grace motif which allows, indeed demands, the contribution of nature in the operations of grace. According to the Roman Catholic nature-grace pattern, the uniqueness of the mediation of Jesus Christ needs to be qualified in terms of requiring the participation of nature in the working out of the mediation. Moreover, this already established basis for an enlarged mediation is also supported by the incarnational model of Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-understanding, whereby the relationship between the ascended Son of God and the ecclesial body which prolongs his incarnation is so organically bound up that the mediation of the former is worked out by means of the mediation of the latter. The Church, therefore, as the body of Christ and the sacrament of the intimate union with God and humanity, shares the mediatory office of Jesus Christ whose incarnation she extends. In this respect, *Lumen Gentium* aptly summarises the thrust of this typically Roman Catholic procedure where Christology and ecclesiology meet by asserting that “the unique mediation of the Redeemer does not exclude but rather gives rise among creatures to a manifold cooperation which is but a sharing in this unique source” (LG 62). The Roman Catholic “manifold cooperation” is not thought of at the expense of the uniqueness of the mediatorship of the Redeemer, but is deemed to be as perfectly compatible with it against the background of the participation of nature in the outworking of grace. The Roman

Catholic train of thought is also reinforced by the statement according to which all expressions of human cooperation “neither take away from nor add anything to the dignity and efficacy of Christ the one Mediator”, which is another way of underlining the shared nature of the mediatory office while upholding the uniqueness of that of Jesus Christ at the same time. Here again, the Protestant exclusiveness of the *solus Christus* is far removed from the comprehensiveness of the Roman Catholic mindset which envisages the *et-et* pattern even in relation to mediation. The two hermeneutics of the uniqueness of Christ clearly clash in their different understandings of what it entails as far as the involvement of other agencies is concerned.

The fact that the statement quoted above from *Lumen Gentium* appears in the context of the mariological paragraphs of the Constitution which stress “the role of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of God in the mystery of Christ and the Church” (§§ 52-69), highlights the complementary Roman Catholic conviction that what is ascribable to the Church in general in terms of her active participation in the mediation of Christ, is even appropriate to Mary. In fact, one of the titles she is invoked with is “Mediatrix” (LG 62). The theological structure of the Roman Catholic framework is here exemplified in its stemming from the meeting point between its nature-grace motif and the incarnational model around which the self-understanding of the Church revolves. In this respect, the Roman Catholic doctrine of Mary is the most typical expression of this significant intersection which reflects the encounter of the most fundamental elements of the system.

Another telling paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* adds other important elements to the overall picture concerning the composite nature of mediation in the Roman Catholic system. In fact, apart from being characterised by the participation of the Church in the unique office of Jesus Christ, the Roman Catholic view of mediation also mirrors the strongly hierarchical outlook of its framework. The involvement of the Church in the mediatory mission of Jesus Christ primarily concerns his apostles and their successors, that is the bishops. In turn, the bishops hand over to different individuals in the Church “various degrees of participation” in this ministry (28). So, the participation of the Church, while involving the whole Church, in that the Church as a whole is the extension of the incarnation of the Son of God, is also marked by its

⁹⁰ e.g. the Tridentine *Decretum de incarnatione, veneratione et reliquiis sanctorum et sacris imaginibus* (3 December 1563, Sessio XXV; *DS* 1821) and Pío X’s 1904

hierarchical structure whereby different subjects within her participate in the sharing of Christ's ministry in different degrees and forms. Notwithstanding the complexity surrounding the inner constitution of the Roman Catholic Church, an incontrovertible fact needs to be repeated here because it is crucially important for an Evangelical evaluation of the Roman Catholic system: the Roman Catholic view of mediation requires the participation of the Church in the unique ministry of Jesus Christ because the basic dispositions of its system demand it.

Earlier on, reference was made to an insightful comment by Charles Hodge according to which "almost all the points of difference between Protestants and Romanists depend on the decision of the question, 'What is the Church?'. The whole thrust of this section on the Church as the mediator of the Roman Catholic system has suggested the substantial plausibility of this simple observation. Indeed, the ecclesiological issue is central both for any attempt to come to grips with the Roman Catholic system and for the shaping of an Evangelical appraisal of it based on its essential tenets. Together with the analysis of the Roman Catholic composite, yet unitary rendering of the nature-grace motif, the theological self-understanding of the Church provides the framework for the whole system to articulate its vision and to nurture its mission.

In an apologetic book whose aim was to demonstrate the continuity between the gospel and the Church and therefore to uphold the plausibility of the Roman Catholic version of Christianity, the French philosopher and apologist Jean Guitton briefly examines the theological arguments brought forward by the Reformation in its controversy with medieval Roman Catholicism. In this respect, after a rather conventional presentation of points at issue, he concludes by asserting that "the Reformation has crossed the abyssal line which separates the critique of the *abuse* from the critique of the *essence*" of Roman Catholicism.⁹¹ In pointing out the basic importance of the relationship between nature and grace as well as the incarnational profile of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, an Evangelical systemic assessment of Roman Catholicism should be interested in dealing with the essence of the system and in elaborating a constructive critique of it in light of its own fundamental framework of reference. This could be a useful contribution to present-day

Encyclical *Ad diem illum*, DS 3370.

⁹¹ Guitton (1961) 40.

theological and ecumenical discussions on what is a chief *raison d'être* of the division of Western Christianity on the eve of the Third Millennium.

6.2 THE THEOLOGICAL EVALUATIONS OF ROMAN CATHOLICISM EXPRESSED IN THE EVANGELICAL PERSPECTIVES AFTER THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

It has been the aim of this chapter so far to suggest that it is in the areas of the nature-grace relationship and ecclesiology that the Roman Catholic system presents its distinctive worldview. Together they constitute the ideological core of the system. As for the relationship between nature and grace, the Roman Catholic system, while embracing a number of rather different, sometimes contrasting articulations of the motif, nonetheless retains in its synthesis a view of this relationship which, in its relative optimism, envisages the possibility of nature of being elevated or imbued by grace. As for the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church, it is centred on the conviction that the incarnation of the Son of God continues in an analogical way in His ecclesial body which is the Church. The various combinations of the Roman Catholic nature-grace motif and the incarnational model of Roman Catholic ecclesiology are always in operation in the outworking of the system. They are the two poles of its ideological core and are to be found in any of its manifestations. A systemic approach to Roman Catholicism will need to discern the incidence of these two combined elements as they shape its doctrine and practice.

In the concluding part of this thesis we shall return to the Evangelical theologians and writings which were presented in the second, third, and fourth chapters; this time with the intention of assessing them in terms of the degree of systemic awareness they display in their perspectives on Roman Catholicism. This evaluation was already carried out in the fifth chapter with an attempt to survey their understanding of Roman Catholicism in general; it is now time to turn to them again trying to look at the way in which the relationship between nature and grace in Roman Catholicism and its incarnational ecclesiology are considered as pivotal elements in order to understand its system.

After examining a vast amount of material related to the work of individual theologians as well as of representative bodies and theological dialogues, a critical evaluation of Evangelical approaches of Roman Catholicism is called for. In other

words, the issue at stake is whether or not and to what degree they manifest a pattern of theological discernment which accounts for the two *foci* of the Roman Catholic system, that is the nature-grace motif and the ecclesiological self-awareness of the Church.

6.2.1 Gerrit Berkouwer

In surveying the trajectory of the in-depth analysis of Berkouwer on Roman Catholicism, reference was made to the different phases of his reflection on the subject, namely his pre-Vatican II book which is marked by a distinctly systemic approach and frank theological controversy on fundamental issues, and his volume written while the Second Vatican Council was still working which is instead characterised by a greater awareness of the complexity of the contemporary Roman Catholic universe and by a sort of theological puzzlement as far as the conflicting theological trends within the Church are concerned. This basic development of Berkouwer's theological perception of what is at stake with Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical and Reformed perspective is also reflected in the slight, though significant change in his theological hermeneutics used in studying it.

As has been already pointed out,⁹² *The Conflict with Rome* clearly attributes some importance to the nature-grace motif which is thought of as being the central theological issue between Protestantism and Roman Catholicism from which all other differences can be traced and investigated. Berkouwer's way of presenting his own assessment of the matter tends to underline the doctrine of grace more than the view of nature in such a way that, within the overall motif, the pole of grace is considered the most fundamental aspect which includes the other. In other words, in Berkouwer's *Conflict with Rome*, grace is thought of as subsuming nature in that any doctrine of grace relies on a particular and correspondent doctrine of nature, which is implied in the former even though it is not explicitly articulated in its own terms. In this sense, Berkouwer reflects on the conflicting doctrines of grace while not pondering on the diverging doctrines of nature from which they originate and to which they refer in the context of the bipolar motif. In *The Conflict with Rome*, a distinctly systemic awareness and a significant degree of theological insight clearly operate in singling out the issue of grace as the decisive factor of theological differentiation between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism, even though the

⁹² Cf. 2.1.1, 45-50.

composite structure of the nature-grace motif is usually examined in one of its constitutive elements rather than in its totality.

As far as the ecclesiological issue is concerned, Berkouwer in his first phase is fully aware of the *a priori* "identity-view" which characterises the Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-understanding whereby the Church is thought of as "the continued incarnation of the heavenly Lord".⁹³ Quite consistently with his own approach which is focussed on the centrality of the doctrine of grace, the Dutch theologian thinks that Roman Catholic ecclesiology is nothing but an ecclesiological outworking of the Roman Catholic doctrine of grace, with special reference to the historical and institutional embodiments of grace within the context of the economy of the incarnation. According to Berkouwer, then, the Roman Catholic view of the Church certainly has a systemic relevance for the whole of the system, even though it is of secondary and derived importance when compared with the far more central place of the doctrine of grace. The relationship envisaged between grace and Church is that of cause and effect, as is the case for any other manifestation of the Roman Catholic system which is theologically grounded in its doctrine of grace.

The other major book by Berkouwer testifies to a development in his theological perception and systemic appraisal. If his pre-Vatican II *Conflict with Rome* centred on the gulf between Roman Catholic and Protestant theologies concerning the doctrine of grace, his post-Vatican II *New Catholicism* revolves around "the ecclesiastical-pneumatological issue",⁹⁴ with particular reference to the nature of the guarantee of the presence of the Spirit in the Church. Of course, Berkouwer is fully aware that these new emphases which emerged during the Council did not replace old ones, but are simply added to the traditional Roman Catholic outlook, thus making the task of interpreting the Roman Catholic system far more nuanced and complex than ever before. It is however worth noticing that in this book the strong emphasis on the doctrine of grace is substantially downplayed at the expense of the growing importance attributed to the ecclesiological issue which, in an earlier stage, was considered as secondary. In reading the proceedings of Vatican II, Berkouwer is conscious that the Council has had a strong ecclesiological thrust and has therefore placed the ecclesiological issue at the centre of the process of ecclesial *aggiornamento*. Anyone wishing to deal with the theology of Roman

⁹³ CWR, 23. Cf. 2.1.1, especially 47-48.

⁹⁴ SVCNC, 110. Cf. 2.1.2, especially 56.

Catholicism in general, and of Vatican II in particular, needs to address the ecclesiological issue as the decisive element in coming to terms with the present-day Roman Catholic universe. In accepting this premise, Berkouwer reshapes his theological analysis by paying attention to the renewed ecclesiological profile expressed by the Council and by relaxing the sense of its being dependent on the doctrine of grace, as he had argued in *The Conflict with Rome*. The ecclesiological issue is elevated to the status of being the crucial area both for interpreting Roman Catholicism and for pointing out the real demarcation between differing Christian traditions. The strong emphasis on the doctrine of grace is here replaced with the interest shown for the doctrine of the Church, which can now stand on its own terms without being analysed under the rubric of grace.

On the whole, it appears plausible to say that while in *The Conflict with Rome* Berkouwer tends to subsume nature in grace, and ecclesiology in the doctrine of grace, in *The New Catholicism* he seems to underestimate the development of the nature-grace motif in Roman Catholic theological circles while subsuming the whole ecumenical problem between Roman Catholicism and Protestantism in the ecclesiological domain. His systemic awareness seems to lose theological insight and comprehensiveness as he gives less attention to a truncated form of the nature-grace motif and instead draws attention to the ecclesiological divergence in a way that tends to sever it from the background of the nature-grace motif, without offering a penetrating Evangelical critique of recent trends in the self-understanding of the Roman Catholic Church. Berkouwer's unfinished evaluation of Roman Catholicism is a rich source of theological wisdom for the shaping of an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism, but it lacks theological coherence and systemic integrity in proposing a viable model for further research and reflection. His systemic analysis is certainly fertile, but must be judged defective in some important areas.

6.2.2 Cornelius Van Til

Among the Evangelical theologians who have attempted to suggest a systemic perspective on both pre- and post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, Van Til is the one who has addressed the nature-grace motif in the most consistent way. Whereas Berkouwer approaches the issue by insisting on the overarching significance of grace and downplaying that of nature, Van Til singles out the relationship between nature and grace as such and has considered it as the pivotal point of the whole system as

well as of his own evaluation of it. Furthermore, Van Til rightly points out the importance of traditional Thomism in shaping the Roman Catholic understanding and articulation of the motif. According to Van Til, the whole Roman Catholic worldview rests on the grand synthesis systematically framed by Thomas Aquinas and reinvigorated by the subsequent Thomistic tradition between the Aristotelian concept of nature and the Christian doctrine of grace. Its conciliatory motivation and composite structure are for Van Til indicators of its being a profoundly flawed pattern for a Christian worldview in that it concedes too much to pagan thought-forms and therefore rules out the integrity of Christian presuppositions by mingling them with pagan categories at a basic level. On top of that, and bearing in mind Van Til's interests in the field of apologetics, he has also shown some epistemological and moral implications of the Thomistic version of the motif, especially as far as the final point of predication of the Roman Catholic theological discourse and man's ethical inner ability to attain a virtuous life. His treatment of the nature-grace motif in traditional Roman Catholicism is the most consistent and comprehensive attempt, within the scope of all the Evangelical authors and writings here examined, to address this paramount element from a distinctively Protestant standpoint.

In confronting Van Til's presuppositional approach to Roman Catholicism, there is a main criticism which has been put forward and which is worth considering briefly in order to assess it. The critical reading of Van Til on this matter has to do with his understanding of Thomas and with his critical appraisal of his thought. According to Arvin Vos, Van Til is among those contemporary Evangelical theologians and thinkers who have patently misread Thomas and who have built for themselves an image of the Angelic Doctor which is grossly misleading.⁹⁵ In this line of assessment, Van Til is one of the many scholars who have mistakenly exchanged the rigid and dualistic essentialism of modern Thomism with the nuanced fluidity of

⁹⁵ This is the thrust of the argument by Vos (1985) who has particularly in mind the writings of Herman Dooyeweerd, Cornelius Van Til, Nicholas Wolterstorff, Alvin Plantinga, Carl Henry and Francis Schaeffer. In a milder way and with less provocative intentions, Geisler (1991) has also suggested that the "traditional Evangelical criticism" of Thomas (including Van Til, but also Os Guinness, Gordon Clark, Carl Henry, E.J. Carnell, Arthur Holmes, Roland Nash) is too rigid, negative, and unfair to Thomas Aquinas himself, 11-23. Distancing himself from fellow Evangelical readers of Thomas and trying to overcome "Evangelical antipathy", Geisler thinks that his philosophy is perfectly compatible with classic Protestant thought whereas his theology is already marked by some excessive sacramental features to the point of not being acceptable to mainstream Protestant theology.

Thomas himself, attributing to the latter what is instead a feature of the former. More important than this historiographical and theological discussion is the issue concerning Thomas' apologetic strategy in dealing with the heritage of classical culture in his time embodied particularly in Aristotle.

If theologically plausible, this train of argument would blatantly disqualify the thrust of Van Til's interpretative grid of Roman Catholicism in that it would question one of its main presuppositions, that is an accommodating attitude towards Paganism and the resulting synthesis operated by Thomas between Aristotle and Christ. The scope of Vos' criticism would require an investigation of Van Til's interpretation of Thomas Aquinas which goes beyond the limits of the field of research of the present thesis. The fact that Vos' critique is not confined to Van Til alone but encompasses many outstanding present-day Protestant thinkers is another element which urges caution in passing trenchant judgements on both the arguments questioned and those who question those arguments. As has been already pointed out in the section on the Roman Catholic articulation of the nature-grace motif,⁹⁶ the interpretation of Aquinas is a critical issue which was and still is hotly debated in Roman Catholic theology. The changing fortunes of the Thomistic tradition, its many, at times contrasting voices, and the radical reinterpretations which it has gone through in XX century, speak of the complexity of the task of reading the monumental work of Aquinas, even in the confessional tradition which considers his thought highly. In the light of this, it is not surprising to find that it is a contentious issue even in Protestant circles which attempt to grapple with his thought and theological legacy, coming as they do from a different tradition of Christian thought which has historically found it difficult to come to terms with Roman Catholic Scholasticism. As Norman Geisler's contribution towards an Evangelical reassessment of Thomas Aquinas suggests,⁹⁷ the issue of an Evangelical interpretation of Thomism in general and of Aquinas in particular remains open and Van Til, among others, is a voice which needs to be carefully listened to in order to gain an insight into the very fabric of a strongly apologetic Protestant worldview as confronted with another worldview represented by the Thomistic tradition. Certainly, an Evangelical systemic perspective on Roman Catholicism is bound to address the legacy of Thomas Aquinas and its relevance for the whole of the Roman Catholic

⁹⁶ Cf. 6.1.1, 193-217.

⁹⁷ Geisler (1991).

system. As Hans Urs von Balthasar has rightly commented: “What Thomas Aquinas built is a form - and he displayed this form so widely and convincingly that not only elements of the past but also those of the future could have room in his thought; either by being able to incorporate the new into itself or by being fruitful enough to let itself be transformed *by* the new”.⁹⁸ Any evaluation of Roman Catholicism, even if exclusively interested in recent trends, has to come to grips with the “form” construed by Thomas Aquinas which is capable of facing the new challenges without losing the old pattern.

Another critical comment that could be added to the previous one is in regard to Van Til’s apparent neglect of the other foundational feature of the Roman Catholic system as envisaged in this chapter. In fact, apart from the Roman Catholic understanding of the nature-grace motif, the ecclesiological self-awareness of the Roman Church has a central role in shaping the unity, project, and structures of the system. In this respect, while he majors on the critique of the Thomistically conceived relationship between nature and grace, Van Til does not pay the same attention to the ecclesiological issue, thus downplaying the importance of the Church in his understanding of the core of the Roman Catholic system. This negligence may be due to the specificity of Van Til’s thought and expertise. It could well be argued that Van Til was strictly speaking more of an apologist than a theologian and, therefore, he was much more interested in the ontological and epistemological aspects of the Roman Catholic system rather than its ecclesiological outlook. On the whole, Van Til’s overall evaluation of Roman Catholicism as a system is certainly incomplete on the ecclesiological side, but his critical comments on the nature-grace motif are more centred and insightful, though no less questionable, than those put forward by other Evangelical writings here analysed.

6.2.3 David Wells

If the late Berkouwer has insisted on on-going development within Roman Catholic ecclesiology as a characterising feature of its system and Van Til has instead underlined the rather intangible though fluid structure of the Roman Catholic nature-grace motif which warrants its dynamic stability, David Wells has tried to account for both foundational aspects of Roman Catholicism as they have emerged from the proceedings of the Second Vatican Council. However, the task of providing a

⁹⁸ Von Balthasar, *Karl Barth* (1992) 252 (italics in the text).

distinctly Evangelical theological hermeneutic of the system has not been pursued further than a preliminary stage. In fact, after singling out the issues which deserve to be studied more thoroughly, Wells has truncated the promising works on Roman Catholicism which he was producing. As has been already pointed out,⁹⁹ his analysis contained in *Revolution in Rome* is therefore a tentative and provisional reading of the conciliar texts which, unfortunately, has not been followed by a more comprehensive and reflective evaluation. Even so, his profound intuitions merit some comment.

Wells is one of the few Evangelical theologians dealing with Vatican II who shows an awareness of the development of the theological agenda of the Council as far as the relationship between nature and grace is concerned. His interpretation of *Gaudium et spes* in particular indicates for him the gradual yet significant shift which is taking place within the Roman Catholic perception of the motif. The traditional, static, and essentialist Thomistic version of the motif is laid aside not to the point of being fully replaced, but to the extent of being integrated with a new perspective which envisages more dynamic categories and attempts to overcome the dualistic tendencies inherited from the Thomistic tradition of the past by providing a new framework of reference in which natural and supernatural are thoroughly intertwined and exist in a relation of reciprocity. Wells observes this theological trend within Roman Catholicism and sees it magisterially backed up by Vatican II. He then begins to explore the consequences of this process and its effects on the Roman Catholic doctrine of salvation. Here he focusses on the role of man's co-operative agency within the process of salvation which is seen to be initiated and sustained by divine grace, perceiving a substantial continuity with the concurrency between nature and grace which is characteristic of Thomism that is already well established in Roman Catholic theology. This initial, necessary step, however, is only sketched out and not pursued further.

The same unfinished task appears in Wells' perplexed evaluation of the developments within Roman Catholic ecclesiology whose inner tensions are singled out and brought to light. In this respect, Wells is well aware that the Second Vatican Council has had a prominent ecclesiological profile and that in order to ascertain what is at stake with present-day Roman Catholicism one needs primarily to address the ecclesiological issue. Here again, Wells struggles in coming to grips with, in his

⁹⁹ Cf. 2.3.1, 72-75.

view, the conflicting ecclesiological agenda emerging from the Council and, in his position, he cannot do anything but acknowledge this fact without being capable of providing a theological rationale for the Roman Catholic “state of flux” from an Evangelical perspective. In the end, David Wells seems to understand the dynamics of the Roman Catholic system, and is able to focus on its main contours, yet he stops at the threshold of a comprehensively worked out Evangelical theological analysis of the system.

6.2.4 Donald Bloesch

The limited scope of Bloesch’s studies on Roman Catholicism does not enable his works to convey a full-fledged theological critique of its system. Moreover, his view of Roman Catholicism as an ideal type of Christianity is dependent more on sociological categories than theological ones, thus narrowing the possibility for a properly defined theological assessment from a systemic point of view. Against this background, it should not be surprising to note that the nature-grace motif is not an issue which is clearly addressed by Bloesch nor even implicitly touched on. Other concerns seem to drive his interests, either comparative or descriptive ones, to the point that he investigates the phenomenology of Roman Catholicism more than its theology. Even Roman Catholic ecclesiology is not given the importance it has in shaping its system so that the other foundational pillar of the Roman Catholic system is not studied as it should be.

As a general comment, it is arguable that Bloesch’s perspectives on Roman Catholicism are theologically “atomistic”,¹⁰⁰ to use the term introduced by Berkouwer and referred to in the previous chapter, in that they approach the Roman Catholic system in a fragmented way both in the sense that their critical insights tend to be episodic and their perception of Roman Catholicism insufficiently grasps its comprehensive catholicity.

6.2.5 Herbert Carson

The theologically popular critique put forward by Herbert Carson prefers to address the phenomenology of Evangelical perplexity in confronting Roman Catholicism, rather than its theological aetiology. This is to say that the question of the relationship between nature and grace is not articulated in Carson’s writings, instead

¹⁰⁰ Cf. 5.4, 182-183.

his attention is given to classical controversial topics such as the doctrine of justification, Mary, the sacraments, etc. In so doing, apart from choosing to pursue a polemical approach, Carson reflects on the different manifestations of the Roman Catholic system, be they doctrinal or devotional, but does not tackle its fundamental core which is related to the nature-grace motif and its ecclesiological self-awareness.

Even his critical considerations on the Roman Catholic view of the Church are developed from the same tendentially atomistic perspective which is not capable of accounting for the complex, historically developing, ecclesologically manifold, yet unitary reality of Roman Catholicism as a system and its ecclesial dimension. His overall evaluation presents items of Evangelical critique in popular-polemical style, but not an integrated, theological interpretation from an Evangelical viewpoint.

6.2.6 John Stott

The world-wide dimensions of John Stott's contribution to present-day Evangelicalism makes it interesting to see how his own interaction with Roman Catholic officials and Roman Catholic theology has been reflected in wider Evangelical attitudes to and evaluations of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. As has been underlined in the second chapter,¹⁰¹ John Stott's own approach has undergone significant development from the somewhat controversial line followed in his early writings to the greater willingness for dialogue which emerged after the 1974 Lausanne Congress on World Evangelisation. In this respect, ERCDOM is the fruit of the more ecumenically inclined attitude advocated by Stott and is therefore the document whose theological thrust needs to be considered because it represents his more mature views and concerns.

Since it is the result of a renewal of missionary impetus within both Evangelical and Roman Catholic constituencies, ERCDOM mainly focuses on missiological themes of common interest, thus facing the issue of providing a theological understanding of Roman Catholicism from a missiological angle. While not impeding a systemic analysis in principle, this approach certainly qualifies it in terms of addressing at least the missiological thrusts of the respective systems. The nature of the document is another feature which needs to be taken into consideration in assessing its contribution toward the shaping of an Evangelical theological perspective on Roman Catholicism. ERCDOM is not a fully fledged theological

¹⁰¹ Cf. 2.6, 97-109.

evaluation in the academic sense of the expression, but a brief account of the main points addressed in a bilateral conversation conducted in a friendly environment for both parties involved. Bearing in mind these preliminary remarks, the theological insight shown by the Evangelical contributors to ERCDOM is rather weak as far as an attempt at systemic analysis is concerned, especially in its underestimation of the importance of the nature-grace motif. In fact, the issue of nature and grace is not mentioned nor evoked even though it has clear missiological consequences in determining the basic theological framework for mission as well as the outlook of the system in expressing its missionary nature and task. Both the concepts and experience of mission, salvation, and conversion emerge from the way in which nature and grace are understood and related but ERCDOM fails to recognise this and to structure the dialogue accordingly. What is instead considered as basic for the dialogue on mission is a brief discussion on the issues of "Revelation and authority" which deals with the theological meaning of truth, the practice of biblical interpretation and the exercise of the teaching office of the Church.¹⁰² The heuristic choice of ERCDOM briefly addresses the gnoseology and epistemology of revelation as if they were the essential premises for a meaningful ecumenical discourse on mission but it downplays the significance of the nature-grace motif in shaping Christian missiological awareness and consequent theological reflection.

While showing an overall indifference to the relationship between nature and grace thematically articulated, ERCDOM is far more interested in the ecclesiological issue because it is thought of as having more immediate connections with the primary recipient as well as agent of mission, that is the Church. The Church is described in terms of being "part", "fruit", "embodiment" and, finally, "agent" of the Gospel,¹⁰³ features of the Church which, if superficially understood, both Evangelicals and Roman Catholics uphold in various degrees, even though serious differences between them are acknowledged in the document. In this sketchy presentation of the missiological framework of the respective ecclesiologies, no explicit reference is made to the incarnational analogy of Roman Catholic ecclesiological self-awareness nor is it mentioned by Stott or by others in the Evangelical party as a persistent element of division between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics. The same negligence is manifested towards the related dimension

¹⁰² ERCDOM, 16-25.

¹⁰³ ERCDOM, 65-69.

of the sacramentality of the Church which was becoming the ecclesiological password of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism. ERCDOM does not take note of the development of Roman Catholic ecclesiology as it does not seem to pay attention to the traditional incarnational motif which is in fact central in its modern history and systemic outlook. On the whole, while the theological weight of ERCDOM is limited and in need of a more sustained effort, it nonetheless reflects the search for a methodology of dialogue based on mutual respect and commitment to reciprocal listening.

John Stott is a widely recognised spokesperson for present-day Evangelicals, and his interaction with Roman Catholicism and Roman Catholics reflect more general trends traceable within Evangelicalism in the aftermath of the Second Vatican Council and the 1974 Lausanne Congress of World Evangelisation. While the emerging attitude between Evangelicals, so well represented by Stott's own willingness to engage in ecumenical dialogue, progressively becomes less hostile and more constructive, the theological insight and systemic awareness shown in confronting Roman Catholicism is still wanting because it does not deal consistently with the theological tenets of the Roman Catholic system which are treated in the present chapter and prefers to address different aspects of it in an atomistic manner.

6.2.7 The Contribution of the World Evangelical Fellowship

As has already been mentioned, WEF has contributed to the shaping of present-day Evangelical perspectives on Roman Catholicism in two different ways: the first was through its own 1986 *Perspective on Roman Catholicism* which summarised a somewhat traditional Evangelical reading of the theology of the Roman Catholicism which emerged from Vatican II and called Evangelicals to a more careful exercise of theological discernment in dealing with it; the second way was through the official bilateral dialogue with Vatican officials initiated in 1988 which is still going on and which has produced some material which deserves to be analysed.

As far as the theological import of the *Perspective* is concerned, the document, while showing a significant degree of Evangelical integrity and frankness, does not seem to be interested in pursuing a theological approach which recognises the paramount importance of the nature-grace motif. The *Perspective*, instead, chooses to articulate a set of "status quæstionis" regarding several contentious issues between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics, both doctrinal and ecclesiastical. These

controversial points seem to be the contours, or better the manifold manifestation of the fundamental problem which is based on the theological thrust of the system, rather than the real, basic, systemic point at issue between the two traditions.

In spite of this evident shortcoming, when it comes to articulating a theological critique of Roman Catholic ecclesiology, the *Perspective* is more willing not only to acknowledge the existence of a systemic differentiation between Evangelicals and Roman Catholic but also to address it in more explicit terms, even though the word “system” and its derivatives are not used. In the section devoted to “Sacramentalism and the Eucharist”, the document particularly singles out the profound and far-reaching theological difference which exists between the Roman Catholic sacramental view of the Eucharist and the Evangelical strong affirmation of the finished sacrifice of Christ which is related to the Evangelical understanding of the Lord’s Supper. In view of this radically different premise, the *Perspective* spells out the implications in a clear systemic way. The statement in question is worth quoting at length as it says: “our evangelical critique of Roman Catholic sacramentology points up the conflict between two opposing views of the Christian faith. Rome sees itself as an extension of the Incarnation, thus divinizing human beings as they cooperate with God’s grace which is conferred by the church. Over against this view stands our evangelical commitment to the free gift of righteousness, imputed solely by the grace of God, received by a true faith which answers to God’s Word, and based fully upon the once-for-all expiation of guilt through the finished sacrifice of the perfect Substitute, Christ Jesus. This confession is for us the gospel”.¹⁰⁴ In this unusually clear statement, a kind of systemic approach is evoked in the sense that the vocabulary of “conflict” and “opposition” is used, thus making it clear that the issue at stake is something of fundamental importance which cannot easily be solved nor simply bypassed. When confronted with the Roman Catholic articulation of the theology of the sacraments, the Evangelical standpoint is, according to the *Perspective*, “over against” it. Secondly, a plausible reference is made to the Roman Catholic understanding of the incarnation which indicates, at least in an implicit way, the over-arching significance of the incarnation for the Roman Catholic system and the relationship between the sacramental framework of the Eucharist and the more fundamental incarnational pattern of Roman Catholic theology. Thirdly, the Roman Catholic insistence on the necessity of human co-

¹⁰⁴ ERT 11:1 (1987) 88.

operation with divine grace is mentioned, thus suggesting that the Roman Catholic nature-grace motif on which it depends is also involved in its sacramentology. Fourthly and finally, the prominent role of the Church is here envisaged in her capacity to “confer” the grace of God through her sacramental life and structure.

So, the main elements of a systemic analysis of Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical viewpoint as proposed in the present research are briefly referred to in this statement, though the *Perspective* would have gained theological weight if it had explored these issues more carefully and in more detail, concentrating its attention on the Roman Catholic system rather than its complex outlook.

The dialogue which was initiated after the release of the long document has been a further opportunity for WEF to develop its own theological hermeneutic of Roman Catholicism and to refine the rather controversial approach fostered in the 1986 *Perspective*, especially by way of encountering Vatican officials and debating with them and listening to them instead of talking of them without their being present. The personalisation of the dialogue has somehow modified not only the psychological attitude of WEF representatives towards Roman Catholicism as a whole by way of softening the strongly felt division, but has also contributed to the rethinking of their theological perspectives on it because they have been confronted with Roman Catholic theologians and not with an impersonal theological discourse.

The evaluation of the Evangelical input to the dialogue from a theological and systemic point of view really depends on individual contributions to the dialogue and can hardly be extended to the dialogue as a whole. The WEF Theological Commission may have its own common strategy and goals, but because the dialogue is made up of papers read and listened to, their theological profile varies according to the scholars giving them. While the unitary, yet manifold nature of the 1986 *Perspective* gave voice to the whole of WEF, thus representing a wide constituency on the issue of Roman Catholicism, the subsequent dialogue is more focussed on single, individual contributions given under the umbrella of WEF, but not representing its composite theological outlook. This is another way of saying that each paper needs to be evaluated in its own terms.

Among the Evangelical theologians involved in the dialogue so far, Henri Blocher seems to be the most alert in addressing systemic issues, or at least pointing to them, while dealing with the topics of the different consultations. In the 1993 Venice meeting on the general theme of “Justification, Scripture and Tradition”, for

instance, Blocher clearly perceives that the relationship between Scripture and tradition under scrutiny is ultimately closely linked to the broader, underlying question of the relationship between nature and grace.¹⁰⁵ Unfortunately, given the prominent theological importance of the motif which is fully recognised, these brief comments are not developed sufficiently because of the need to address the specific issue of Scripture and tradition. Moreover, it was not considered necessary to encourage WEF to promote a session of the dialogue on the decisive question of how the two traditions envisage theologically the nature-grace scheme.

Apart from Blocher, George Vandervelde is the other WEF Evangelical theologian who, to a lesser degree than Blocher, seems to frame his own contribution against the background of an apparently systemic approach. This is especially true in the case of his 1997 paper for the Jerusalem conversation on “The nature and mission of the Church” in which Vandervelde argues that the “ecclesiological gap” between Evangelical and Roman Catholic theological frameworks is pivotal as well as basic in order to understand other controversial areas. A rough summary of Vandervelde’s argument is that whereas the Evangelical categories used to conceive the Christological-ecclesiological nexus are utterly “relational”, the Roman Catholic ones are predominantly “ontological”.¹⁰⁶ Once again rather unfortunately, these brief, yet promising remarks are not pursued further in the interest of a more thorough theological assessment. The theological insight on Roman Catholic ecclesiology is thus sketched out, but left practically unfinished. The whole of the theological ethos through which WEF is practising the dialogue suffers from the same fragmented approach which is characterised by a lack of a robust theological purpose. Bright intuitions are not expanded adequately and are not made the focus of the dialogue, while the general thrust of the conversation remains on the whole descriptive rather than theologically insightful and fruitful. The theological contribution of WEF to the shaping of a systemic perspective on Roman Catholicism is a matter still *in itinere*, waiting to be settled in a more definitive way.

¹⁰⁵ ERT 21:2 (1997) 125-127. Cf. 3.3.1, especially 121-123.

¹⁰⁶ ERT 23:1 (1999) 46. Cf. 3.3.2, especially 126-128.

6.2.8 “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” and “The Gift of Salvation”

The last documents which need to be assessed in terms of their theological profile are those which were the result of the informal dialogue between some Evangelicals and some Roman Catholics in USA in the Nineties. As has already been indicated both in the presentation of these writings in their context and in the subsequent remarks on the kind of systemic awareness they display, both “Evangelicals and Catholics Together” (ECT) and “The Gift of Salvation” (GOS) present some theologically defective features which impinge on their overall theological plausibility.

In this respect, the nature-grace motif is not only absent from the texts but also practically ignored in that the way in which both common confessional elements and controversial areas are treated seem to be detached from the wider theological framework. It is against this background that both convergences and differences need to be understood. The theological ethos of ECT and GOS which allows the possibility of affirming a sufficiently large consensus on fundamental creedal articles and, at the same time, recognises the persistent distance on equally important doctrines or aspects of the them, clearly shows that both the former and the latter are dealt with without appreciating the theological ground-motif which they stem from. Even the discussion in GOS about justification by faith does not make reference to the context of differing articulations of nature and grace which nourish Evangelical and Roman Catholic views on the understanding of the meaning and outworking of the doctrine itself.

As far as ECT and GOS’s awareness of the ecclesiological issue is concerned, ECT explicitly acknowledges that the “nature of the church” is an area of unresolved theological contrast between Evangelicals and Roman Catholics but does not specify in what sense it is an important problem nor does it suggest ways to face it, apart from calling for serious and friendly debate, if possible freed from old prejudices and polemical harshness.¹⁰⁷ Other contentious issues strictly related to ecclesiology (e.g. ministry, sacraments, Mariology, etc.) are listed as persisting problematic areas, but they do not appear to be correlated to the wider ecclesiological framework in which they are placed. On the same issue, GOS is even more evasive than ECT. While the focus of the document is the disputed doctrine of justification by faith, after outlining the consensus which Evangelical and Roman Catholic signatories have been able to recognise, GOS lists various interrelated, problematic issues which the newly

¹⁰⁷ Cf. ECT, Colson-Neuhaus (1995) xxi. Cf. 4.1.2, 134-137.

discovered agreement leaves altogether unresolved. Among these are found “the Eucharist and sacramental grace” which have direct ecclesiological provenance and consequences, though there is no further indication on why and to what extent they are both strictly quintessential to Roman Catholic ecclesiology and idiosyncratic to an Evangelical doctrine of the Church.

The major contribution of both ECT and GOS is to be found in the changed psychological attitude of the dialogue through which Evangelicals and Roman Catholics are encouraged to cooperate in matters of common interest and concern and to discuss their theological identities with willingness to listen to and to understand the other instead of just preaching one’s own viewpoint to the other. Theologically, though, the ECT process has shown significant flaws, especially as far as the Evangelical part involved in it is concerned, in that its theological awareness of Roman Catholicism as a system has remained seriously wanting, preferring an atomistic approach whose benefits for the prospect of ecumenism seem to be promising in the short term, yet proving to be severely limited in the long run.

At the end of this theological evaluation of the Evangelical perspective on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism, the overwhelming consideration which it is necessary to make is that present-day Evangelical theology not only lacks a unitary hermeneutics of Roman Catholicism, capable of accounting both for the catholicity of the system as well as its *romanitas*, but is also deficient in its ability to come to terms with the theological core of its system, i.e. its own articulation of the nature-grace motif and the incarnational model of its ecclesial self-awareness. This dual – though deeply connected – weakness has curtailed Evangelical sharpness and integrity in confronting post-Second Vatican Council Roman Catholicism.

The Evangelical perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism share a vivid concern for historical developments and doctrinal themes related to Roman Catholicism itself, but, broadly speaking, must be judged to be deficient in theological insight, especially as far as the recognition of the systemic nature of Roman Catholicism and the theological core of the problem between Roman Catholicism and Evangelicalism are concerned. While a systemic perspective on Roman Catholicism from an Evangelical point of view has still to be elaborated and formulated in a consistent way, the last thirty years of Evangelical theology has given us several items which could be used in formulating one, though in themselves

they are insufficient to shape a perspective which comes to grips with the ever-renewing, yet stable universe of Roman Catholicism.

AFTERWORD

Since this thesis focuses on present-day ecumenical trends within Evangelical theology, a concluding reflection on the prospects for Evangelical theology itself is in place at the end of a critical analysis of its interaction with contemporary Roman Catholicism. Its theological perspectives on post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism provide a vantage point from which it is possible to observe and discern wider tendencies within it and highlight critical points which confront it.

In the development of the main argument of the thesis, great emphasis is placed on what has been called the “systemic approach” to Roman Catholicism, i.e. a theological assessment which addresses Roman Catholicism as an institutionalised worldview based on a range of moderately optimistic nature-grace schemes and on a particular ecclesiological vision which brings together Catholic universality and Roman particularity. Starting from this theological viewpoint, the whole thrust of the thesis revolves around the rather defective theological evaluation that Evangelical theology has been able to produce in terms of a systemic approach. Instead of applying a systemically oriented assessment, Evangelical analyses of Roman Catholicism have been characterised by more atomistic perspectives, resulting in fragmented critiques which concentrate more on theological aspects of the system rather than on the system as a complex, yet unified whole. In this way, the theological core of Roman Catholicism has been generally underestimated and downplayed while greater attention has been given to individual theological *loci* on which Evangelicals and Roman Catholics differ more or less significantly.

This specific criticism, however, is not limited to Evangelical involvement in and contributions to ecumenical theology but can be extended further to what appears to be an increasingly distinctive way of theologising which is extremely widespread in much present-day Evangelical theological reflection. In fact, one of the features of present-day Evangelical theology outlined in Chapter One is the progressive erosion of the theological contours of what used to be considered as “foundations” or “essentials” of the Evangelical faith, especially if they entail doctrinal convictions that do not match the criteria of contemporary ecumenical correctness.¹ Together with the loss of the Evangelical cores which have

¹ On these metaphors which are used to describe the importance of the tenets of Evangelical theology, cf. 1.2.1, 36-38.

theologically sharp edges, it is necessary to acknowledge the subtle, yet distinct tendency to shift the “centre”² of the Evangelical faith away from its Reformation formal and material principles and towards its revivalist heritage which has a less pronounced theological profile and a more experiential outlook.³ If Evangelical theology loses its Reformation roots at the expense of its revivalist thrust, the fragile balance between Reformation and Revival is endangered. It simply becomes an intellectual effort aimed at renewing an existing theological vision which needs to be revitalised, rather than a constructive and comprehensive theological worldview characterised by systemic breadth and width. Revivalist theologies generally lack in systemic sharpness and acuteness because they are interested in renewal of aspects of a given theology. The shift from a Reformed-revivalist theology to a less Reformed but more revivalist one has far-reaching consequences for Evangelicalism’s theological fitness in confronting different religious systems.

In the end, a systemic analysis of a given theology, e.g. Roman Catholicism in the case of the present research, can be carried out only by using a theology which is self-consciously and thoroughly systemic. In other words, the theological insight required to understand the operations of a system and to discern its basic elements is found where there is a sufficiently clear systemic self-awareness. The main reason why present-day Evangelical theology has not been able to elaborate a systemic approach to Roman Catholicism is perhaps the fact that Evangelical theology itself is not perceived and thought of as a theological system by many Evangelical theologians themselves.

While Roman Catholicism in its theology and institutions often displays a consistent systemic self-awareness, at least in the works of its authoritative modern interpreters briefly surveyed in Chapter Five⁴ and in its magisterial office, Evangelicalism as a whole is marked by much less systemic awareness. It is also true that only the Reformed strand within it seems to nurture a theological perspective which perceives itself as a flexible, yet definable system with a coherent worldview and a comprehensive project. It is no accident that, in order to ground an Evangelical systemic approach to Roman Catholicism historically and theologically, the “natural”

² Again, cf. 1.2.1, 37.

³ R. Albert Mohler, Jr. would say “away from an Augustinian-Reformation foundation and toward a postmodernized, Arminianized and synthetic new model”. Cf. his “Reformist Evangelicalism: A Center without Circumference” (2000) 138.

place to start was the Dutch calvinist Abraham Kuyper at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century.⁵ Kuyper's insistence on conceiving Calvinism and Romanism as competing religiously based systems was certainly influenced by his idealist philosophical background which gave him the cultural notion of "system". His Reformed theological perspective, however, played an even more fundamental role in shaping his perception of his own Calvinist theology and Protestant culture constituting a whole. From this viewpoint, he was able to address Roman Catholicism as a different system. Moreover, it is not surprising to find the most plausible attempts to elaborate a systemic analysis of post-Vatican II Roman Catholicism in contemporary Reformed theologians like Gerrit Berkouwer, Cornelius Van Til and David Wells.

It is in the Reformed tradition within Evangelicalism that more articulated forms of systemic self-awareness are to be found and it is within this tradition that further work needs to be done in order to refine an even more coherent systemic understanding of Roman Catholicism. Evangelical theology will be able to engage Roman Catholicism systemically only if it regains its Reformation heritage as expressed by the systemic awareness of the Reformed tradition. Other theological traditions within Evangelicalism seem unfit in themselves to pursue such an approach. Even beyond ecumenical interaction and the relationship to Roman Catholicism, the practice of systemic theological thought is a *desideratum* for Evangelical theology at large.

⁴ i.e. John Henry Newman, Romano Guardini, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Avery Dulles and Richard McBrien: cf. 5.2, 167-172.

⁵ Cf. 5.1.1, 152-164.

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The working definition of Evangelical theology that has been adopted in the present thesis has largely determined the scope of its bibliography. Most of the sources listed in the bibliography are an expression of the different Evangelical theological perspectives on Roman Catholicism critically evaluated in the work itself. Since the thesis is primarily on present-day Evangelical theology and its ecumenical profile, it is fitting to divide the bibliography into two main sections.

The first contains primary Evangelical texts which are specifically examined in the thesis. Some are written by individual theologians, others are the published results of Evangelical consultations or Evangelical-Roman Catholic dialogues.

The second section contains a wide range of secondary sources which help to delineate the historico-theological context of the Evangelical perspectives on the Second Vatican Council and the Roman Catholic Church, and also to arrive at a clearer understanding of the highly complex Evangelical scene in the contemporary world.

As far as the first section is concerned, only works related to the subject have been included in the bibliography. Each Evangelical theologian assessed here has a much wider bibliography, but their writings have been selected following a criterion of pertinence with regard to Roman Catholicism in general and Roman Catholic theology in particular.

The works originally published in languages other than English have been included indicating the name(s) of the English translator(s). Occasionally, this indication is not present in the books themselves, which means that the bibliographical data is incomplete in the source itself. For quotations, the English edition of a work has generally been used whereas Latin, French, and German quotations occasionally occur without an English translation. Only in four instances (Dupront, Guardini, Scheffczyk, and Tracy), has the Italian edition of the works been referred to due to the absence (at least to my knowledge) of an English edition. In these cases, I have provided an English translation of the Italian quotation.

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